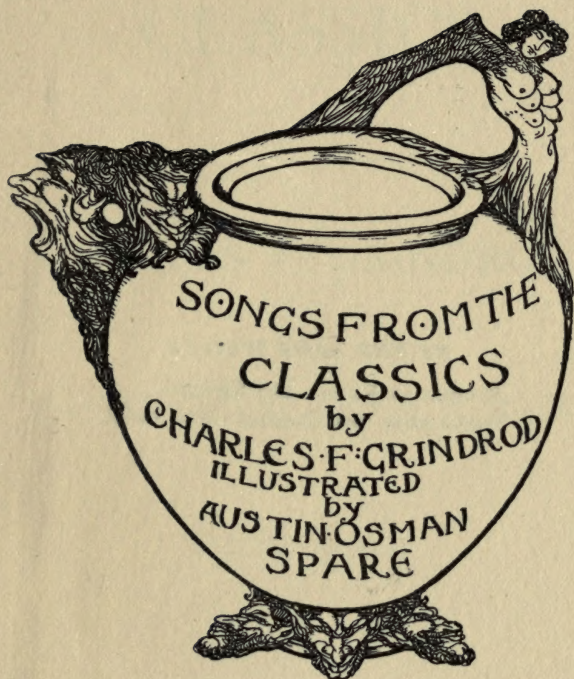


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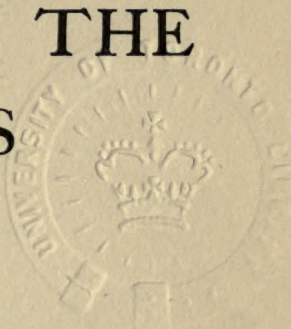


BY THE SAME WRITER.

STUDIES IN RHYME AND RHYTHM.

SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS (*First Series*).

SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS



BY

CHARLES F. GRINDROD

111

ILLUSTRATED BY AUSTIN O. SPARE

SECOND SERIES

LONDON

DAVID NUTT, *At the Sign of the Phoenix*

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1907



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TO MY FRIEND

SIR CHARLES VILLIERS STANFORD

PREFATORY NOTE

AT the present day a writer of verse may be happy if a little light falls on his work, and I am grateful for the kind reception of the first series of these "Songs."

On one point I had hoped for critical comment, whether it were praise or blame. I devised, to suit my themes, what I believe to be two new arrangements of rhythm and rhyme—one of six lines, another of seven. The former consists of four long lines, the first rhyming with the last, and the second with the fifth; and two short lines in the middle, which rhyme together. I judged this to suit such subjects as "The Song of Charon" in my first book; and "Tithonus," "Silenus," and "The Riddle of Œdipus," in the present volume. The other rhythm has one long line at the beginning, and two at the end, which rhyme together; and four short lines in the middle, which rhyme in couplets. In my present book "The Song of Sappho," "Procris and Cephalus," and "Iphigenia" are in this

rhythm. I should be glad to know if I presume too much in thinking the first rhythm suited to weird or philosophic, and the second to romantic, subjects.

In the Greek myths there is often a shadowy meaning hidden under the plain story. I have endeavoured to follow Greek art in this, and, where I thought that I had caught the meaning, have not sought to point it too strongly, but have left the reader to find it for himself.

I have not ventured to depart from the original myths save now and then in small details which seem to fill a blank or to add a point; as the web of Pallas in "Arachne," or the latter's choice of her own work as a rope; or, in "The Song of Sappho," the dramatic justice dealt to Phaon; or (in my former book) the return of her body to Echo when the stillness of night gave a respite to her toil.

Various modern writers having been suggested by some of my critics as the source of any inspiration I possess, I would like to say that I have scarcely read a poem on a classic theme by any writer in any language, and certainly I have read none by any recent author. Such debt as I owe is to a classical dictionary, and to schoolday recollections.

PREFATORY NOTE

ix

I trust that the short "arguments" printed before these poems will not be thought a presumption. It was against my own sense to intrude them, but I yielded to the advice of others, whose opinion was that they would be useful to readers who had either forgotten or were not familiar with classical mythology.

C. F. G.

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THE RIDDLE OF ŒDIPUS

THE STORY OF ŒDIPUS

THE son of Laius and Iocasta, King and Queen of Thebes. Soon after his birth, owing to a prophecy that he should slay his father, the latter pierces and ties together the child's feet, and abandons him on Mount Cithaeron, whence he is rescued by a shepherd of King Polybus of Corinth, and called Œdipus from his swollen feet. Later on, the Oracle of Delphi having declared that he was destined to slay his father and marry his mother, and believing Polybus to be his father, Œdipus leaves Corinth to avoid the threatened sins. On his journey he meets his real father, Laius, who, provoking a quarrel, is slain by him. After this he goes to Thebes, where is the famous Sphinx, the monster which slays every one who fails to answer the riddle it propounds. Œdipus guesses this riddle, whereupon the Sphinx throws itself from the rock, and the hero wins the reward offered by the Thebans—the crown of Thebes, and the widowed Queen for his wife. Afterwards, becoming acquainted with the sins he has unwittingly committed, he puts out his eyes, and, the Thebans regarding his presence as a pollution, he is banished from the Kingdom.



THE RIDDLE OF ŒDIPUS

I GUESSED the Sphinx's riddle : with my knife

I cut that knot ; but never can I read

The secret of the gods : clouds meet

Where the ball rolls beneath their feet.

From cloud they started, and through cloud they lead :

In cloud they shape the rough-hewn block of Life.

Shape they the end, or is it left for Chance

To round or sharpen with the shifting years?

That clanging of the half-closed gate,

Opening and shutting, soon or late,

Whose heavy hinges heed not hopes or fears—

What means it? What the dark-robed Porter's glance?

SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

Above the gate, in letters of pale flame,

The legend—"Here leave all, and enter in!"

Looms through the night; and none can say—

"I strove to come a better way."

No voice must cry—"I stumbled on my sin

When the wind blew my light out as I came."

Enters it, one by one, the mournful race,

Like shadows creeping slowly from the mist.

Before it stands a Sentinel

Who calls the common cry—"All's well!"

The Porter opens: shuts again: they wist

The *where* as doth a stone flung into space.

And as a stone falls whither it is flung,

There is no choosing of another road;

Nor speedeth it to look behind,

Nor to seek shelter from the wind.

Each back must carry its appointed load:

Each voice must sing the song that all have sung.



THE RIDDLE OF ŒDIPUS

7

Drive the high gods the chariot of man's life
Through all its circled course till gained the goal?
Or do the horses reinless run
As once unguided flew the sun?
Are our deeds their own drivers? Is the shoal
Of Chance uncharted on the sea of Strife?

The sleeping soil is full of dreams: one deed
Begets a thousand: our least actions yield
Fruit that needs only sun and rain
To ripen into joy or pain.
Our life is like a sower in a field
Who walks along the furrows flinging seed.

Full of bright visions is the sleeping soil,
Yet haunted by pale ghosts of Circumstance.
Weeds, worms, birds, insects, storm, and blight
Threaten the gifts of earth and light.
Is it a plan, or is it only chance,
The grain that is to grow, the seed to spoil?

8 SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

The farmer Fate sits on a stile : the land
Seems all alike : alike are sun and shower.
Alike the seed when it was sown ;
Yet some is dead, and some scarce grown,
And some is swelling into fruit and flower ;
And over all the field he spreads his hand.

Who can discern the germ within the husk ?
Who can foretell the place where it shall lie ?
Who that is wise hath wit to see
The windings of Fortuity ?
We know that man is born, that he will die,
And that the dawn is followed by the dusk.

In this is consolation for a fool :
He knows no less, the wisest know no more.
Though clear the centre of the bow,
No end and no beginning show.
Vainly our fingers pluck till they are sore :
None can unwind the everlasting spool.

If only we could guess at the Beginning,
How nearer would it bring us to the End?
Still should the old enigma fret
Our thoughts, through years that rise and set
Unanswered—whence we came, and whither wend?
The meaning of our sorrow and our sinning?

Man weaves the web that from the first he wove,
The Earth his spindle, and the Years his frame.
His threads hold fast to rock and tree,
But some upon the wind float free.
He spins and wonders—"Hides the smoke a flame?
Do common wants their own existence prove?"

Life hangs upon a chain of many links,
And half of them are hidden from our view;
And Truth so tangled is in cloud
Only her feet escape the shroud.
The night's so dark, 'tis likelier to be true
What ten fools feel than one wise guesser thinks.

Youth's guesses in a while begin to cloy :

As our heads whiten less we spend on dreams.

A little closer come the years

When looked at through our falling tears :

Our cloudy good a little clearer seems

When coloured with the rainbow of our joy.

Fine must the balance be that weighs our deeds,

And true the scales that measure good and ill !

Each runner's fitness for the race,

The stake, start, finish, time, and place.

Wide is Life's garden, and takes long to till ;

Nor are the blooms all sweet, all rank the weeds.

Some with the wine of Fortune thrive and grow :

Some with the Bitter Chalice temper life.

Some seek the crowd and heat of day :

Others in twilight pasture stray.

The stride of each is measured to the strife :

The fastest run no farther than the slow.

THE RIDDLE OF ŒDIPUS

11

Soon starts the strife. Lo, even in the mother
The battle for the kernel and the shell !
More than a moiety of good
Commingled in the common blood
One witless rival sucks into its cell,
Leaving the rest—the evil—to its brother.

A little stone may check the fastest running.
Man's soul is like a seed by storm-winds blown,
That drop it somewhere, where it lies
Hap-hazard 'twixt the Earth and skies,
Making what growth it may, if it be sown :
If not, then counting growth beyond its cunning.

What chances follow in its fitful flight !
The hungry fowls may snatch it from the air :
The winds may blow it in their haste
To salty sea or desert waste ;
Or past these perils should it safely fare,
Still are there rocks, and thorns, and warping blight.

Or, if its fortune to a better ground
Bear it, beneath the soil wait other foes.
Who can the lurking ills compute
That lie between the seed and fruit?
Happy is he who reckons up his woes,
And still the balance with content is found!

The deeds of our dead days like spectres seem,
That in Time's twilight from our brooding grow.
Life's book hath thumb-marks on each page:
Old figures cross the crumbling stage.
Some faded trifle stirs our tears to flow,
Some broken toy made perfect while we dream.

If the gods closed the portals of our clay,
Could light still shape the shadow of the soul?
To dreams of Dawn would sleep be dead?
Or would some beams be dimly shed?
At our faint cry would Darkness backward roll?
Could our numbed fingers find the door to Day?

THE RIDDLE OF ŒDIPUS

13

The land that looms beyond man's loftiest seat
Horizoned knowledge maps not : dimly sense
 A half-read message doubtful tells,
 Some faintly-lettered meaning spells.
We see a long procession trailing hence,
And hear the dreamlike drums that far-off beat.

Nature is one, and suffers no sharp rent.
 She hath no stage, nor painted wall to hide
 Her entrances and exits. Man
 Threads all the fabric of her plan.
No colours on a chart our deeds divide :
Death is Life's sum, the tale of what is spent.

Star questions star, and spirit to spirit calls :
 Ever the soul its secret would be winning ;
 The misty track beyond the spheres,
 The land that looms behind the years ;
Yea, man would seek Beginning's own beginning,
Would solve the silence whence no answer falls.

Man leans out of a window, lifting up
Wild hands : he questions all the star-stirred sky.
Before him flames an unknown light :
Behind him frowns the fathomless night.
He hears no voice save his own echoed cry.
The jewelled heaven is like an empty cup.

Man makes a pale divinity of Hope.
His cloudy prison he delights to paint
With colours borrowed from his dreams.
His window-bars are bright with beams.
Through the thick gloom he sees a glimmer faint :
Somewhere in stairless Heaven there hangs a rope.

Man, wandering in the circle of his cage,
Weary of wondering how he entered there,
Weary of searching for a vent
To creep from his imprisonment—
Sullen he sits, companioned by Despair,
Silent, or jesting with his bitter rage.

Some cry—"Let go the reins, and to the feast
Drive Sorrow; or let smiling Love chase Woe;
Or fill the empty cup with wine,
And drink till dreaming seems divine!
Since with the careless beast we have to go,
Be ours the careless pleasure of the beast!"

"Virtue is waste, and Knowledge is a boast,"
Some cry. "How rank they with the common dust?
And that soul-conscious gift of Thought,
The shadowy Hope so dearly bought—
Better a worm that for the soil doth lust
Than man, self-haunted by a sickly ghost!"

Some murmur—"To bestow a banquet choice,
Rich meat, rare wine, and lusty appetite,
Then suddenly to say—'We think
'Tis better not to eat or drink,'
Seems wanton. Have we heard the gods aright?
Or have we dreamed we listened to a voice?"

16 SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

Some shriek—"The World is but an ugly weed,
And Nature's path is red with blood that flows.
Only thrive lust, and strife, and wrong :
All's to the cunning or the strong.

Sleep the high gods while some fierce Fury sows ?
Can such rank blossoms spring from Heavenly seed ? "

Others rage not, but in contentment wait.

These through the curtained darkness, closely drawn,
Look for the light that gleams afar,
The pale flame of the Morning Star.

These watch beside the portals of the Dawn,
Patient until the opening of the Gate.

Doth man alone of all created Life—

His stepping-stones—make Death a thing to fear ?

Doth he alone grow pale and lean

With waiting on the veiled Unseen ?

Do dreams of danger haunt a feeding steer ?

Or broods a bullock on to-morrow's knife ?

THE RIDDLE OF ŒDIPUS

17

Yet an ox shivers at the scent of blood,
And a dog rolls his eye when dreams oppress.
The lowest thing that creeps may glance
At times where moonlight shadows dance ;
May dimly share the universal guess,
May crawl a little on the path to Good.

Life's book is still a wonder to our wit—
Here torn, there faded, blurred its lettered gold.
Fainter the writing on the scroll
Shows as the parchment we unroll ;
And what we read is like a tale half-told,
Lost the beginning, and the end unwrit.

Of all that play upon Life's instrument
Hereafter, shall I once more stir the strings ?
And will the pleasure or the pain
Sound like an old tune heard again ?
Shall I but listen while another sings ?
Or will the voices, old and new, be blent ?

18 SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

The Chorus-Master motions to the throng :

 The ghostly chorus answers to his rod.

 The music mates an ancient rhyme,

 As changeless as the tune and time.

 Sometimes we hear it in our dreams, and nod,
Thinking we know the singers and the song.

If from Life's drama that stout strutter " I "

 Were dropped, could some strange actor play the part ?

 Would the pale light we call our flame

 In any lantern burn the same ?

 Hath each small rock its place upon the chart ?

Shines every star in its own patch of sky ?

Man's life is all a question : our first breath

 Would climb to Heaven : our latest clings to Earth.

 Like bats we beat our trembling wings

 About the sky in broken rings.

 The mist is full of shapes. We think our birth

A little less a wonder than our death.

THE RIDDLE OF ÆDIPUS

19

Through the deep silence of the half-seen years

Dim sentinels across the darkness call—

“What news?” And each replies to other—

“Nothing I see or hear, O brother!”

Only the question and the answer fall

In mocking echo to our listening ears.

I, Ædipus, once King of Thebes, a man

Created to endure the shafts of Fate :

Who sought the best, yet found the worst :

Whom gods and men twice judged accurst :

Twice stricken—once by love, and once by hate :

Blinded by the gods—then laid beneath their ban :

I, Ædipus, the Sphinx's problem proved,

Yet cannot prove my own. Ever I bend

Submissive to the Sovereign Will,

Yet the gods' purpose seek I still

To fathom—its beginning and its end ?

The wheel of Life—how fashioned, and how moved ?

Also how they apportion praise and blame?

Why, of two souls, in darkness one is thrust

Without, the other with, a light?

Why one is blind, one clear of sight?

Why fools and wise are equal in their dust?

Why fair and foul both perish in one flame?

To set one in an orchard, and to say—

“Eat the red apples, but the yellow spare,”

’Twere no great puzzle how to please;

But to be shown a thousand trees,

None marked, and told—“Of one of these beware,

The choice a chance”—whose wit could find the way?

I, Œdipus, walked out into the night,

Lampless and limping—by an unseen hand

Thrust forth. So, blindly from the start,

I wandered, aimless, without chart;

Seeing no track, yet keen to understand;

Hating the wrong, but knowing not the right.

THE RIDDLE OF CÆDIPUS

21

The workshop of the gods must strangely fashion
Its tools: the block shapes roughly to its end.
How comes it else that I, who sought
Good deeds, should have unwitting wrought
Evil beyond the grace of gods to mend,
Evil that, while they curse, moves men's compassion?

Is it a god, the tyranny termed Fate?
Walk the high gods themselves its narrow track?
Is each life blazoned with a scroll
Whose flaming letters stamp the soul?
Is there no going on, nor turning back?
Can Good and Ill nought hinder nor abate?

I know not: still far off the answer seems.
Blind came I forth, and blind I shall return.
In Life's strange shuttle lies the proof
Half-hid between the warp and woof.
When from this sleep I waken I may learn
What now is but a whisper from wild dreams.

SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

Meanwhile my soul is mine to serve and keep.

Fate and the gods may trip me, but no force
Can make a traitor of my Will.

So far is Self its own lord still.

Though lame and blind, I would so run my course
That when 'tis finished I may dreamless sleep.

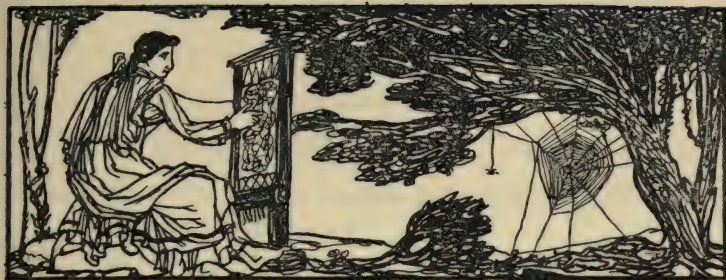
And when at length the murky stream I cross,
When my soul joins the dark-robed ranks below,
Haply my riddle may be read
By the clear lamp that lights the dead :
Haply the balance of the gods may show
In the great Gathering more of gain than loss.



ARACHNE

THE STORY OF ARACHNE

A maiden of Lydia, famous for the beauty of her embroidery. In her pride she challenges the goddess Pallas, the patroness of art among women, to a trial of skill. Arachne produces so fine a piece of work that the goddess can find no fault with it, but to punish the maiden's presumption Pallas tears her work into fragments, and, when Arachne in despair hangs herself on a tree, saves her from death, and then changes her into a spider and the rope into a web.



ARACHNE

EVER I weave my web : I toil and spin
By night and day : my labour hath no end,
But where I finish there must I begin :
What wind and storm-rain blow and break I mend.

Loathsome and foul am I, hated and feared.
Men shudder as they pass me : fluttering things
Fly from my presence : all my life is seared
With wrath and dread—would that I, too, had wings !

Would that the angered gods some other form
Had chosen ! Were I but a bird to spread
My wings, and fly through sunshine and through storm,
It were some joy—life would not be so dread !

My web is hung upon an Olive-tree—

My monstrous web—my home—where I am fated
To dwell, a spider foul, by Heaven's decree
Changed from the shapely form the gods created.

Once was I fair among the Lydian maids,

And with the blithest I could dance or sing.
The echo of my laughter stirred the glades :
My heart was like the freshness of the Spring.

Love, health, and beauty gave the gods to me,

And for my ruin added one gift more :—
My fingers with my needle were so free,
My fame was spread through all the Asian shore.

Fabrics I fashioned broader than a beam,

Yet fine enough to hide within my hand.
My colours were the colours of a dream,
My patterns were the wonder of the land.

ARACHNE

27

Men praised my work, and women longed for it.

Queens to possess it travelled to our town.

Almost a queen myself, I used to sit

With folded hands and dream of my renown.

More than the rest my lover used to fill

My cup of pride, vowing my work divine.

Pallas, he said, could hardly match my skill.

In Heaven and Earth there was no hand like mine.

That was the thought that drove me to my doom.

Its slave by day, it followed me at night.

For it alone my waking soul had room :

My dreams were only wings to help its flight.

Glory of glories were it to defeat

A goddess ! I had heard of wondrous mortals

Who by great deeds had gained a Heavenly seat.

Why should not I unlock the golden portals ?

So did the poison work into my blood,
 So did the worm delve deep into my brain,
Until the evil showed not from the good :
 I only saw the sunshine through the rain.

Oft in a tangled wood I loved to rove,
 Far from my fellows, on my scheme to ponder.
A very phantasy my fever wove :
 My dream grew more and more a thing of wonder.

One day my madness burnt me till I cried—
 “O Pallas, hear my challenge! Be it shown
Which of our needles is the better plied !
 Fain would I match my prowess with thine own !”

Greatly I trembled when a sudden flame
 Blinded my eyes, which bent before its light.
Then, looking up again, a wondrous dame
 I saw—tall, and full-armed, with raiment bright.

Stern was her face, and yet showed something kind.

Beyond the grace of mortals was her form.

Her presence was as sunlight or as wind.

Her voice was like the calm that follows storm.

“Maiden,” she said, and I could feel her eyes

Glowing like flame, “I come at thy desire ;

But gods are just, and strength in mercy lies.

Dost thou still wish to prove the Heavenly fire ?”

I know not if 'twere fate, or stubborn will,

Or senseless pride ; but I had almost knelt

And asked her grace, when lo ! my dreams of skill

Rose in bright colours, and fresh strength I felt.

“Goddess,” I said, “take pity on my pride,

But, as thou art the greatest, I would try

My skill with thine. My art may not abide

A rival, whether of the Earth or Sky.”

30 SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

She smiled : then, frowning, answered—" Have thy way,
And work thy best. I give to thee a year,
While I will take no longer than a day.
When thou hast finished I will meet thee here."

Then vanished she in flaming cloud again ;
And as she went the sky grew dark with gloom,
Light flashed, loud thunder rolled, thick fell the rain :
Almost she seemed to strike a note of doom.

If so, it moved me not. I laughed, and ran
Into my father's house. Pride filled my heart,
And lust of fame. So the gods stir a man
Whom they would strike. I had to play my part.

I thought no more of peril than a child
Pleased with the baleful beauty of a snake.
Ever across my soul a vision wild
Floated of that fair thing I was to make.

ARACHNE

31

Something I longed to fashion that should shame
The best of Earth, and rival that of Heaven.
Long did I dream in vain—then like a flame
My darkness dawned : a glimpse of light was given.

It came to me that I would tell the story
Of the high gods when they unbend to love.
I liked the theme : 'twas rich in mingled glory
Of Earthly things and things that are above.

It pleased me, too, to make the gods descend
From their high throne to share our mortal passion.
Already could I see my colours blend :
Clear stood the stately forms I meant to fashion.

At last my scheme was laid : in part a field
Of fairest yellow, with gold figures wrought.
Elsewhere all hues that Earth and Heaven could yield,
The brightest and the softest ever sought.

Highest of all the Heavenly blue was seen,
 With golden palace, thrones, sun, moon, and stars.
Below, the deep blue sea, and Earth's fair green.
 Still lower, Hell, all black, with fiery bars.

The centre I devoted to great Jove,
 And for his amours hardly had I space.
Frail Semele I rendered in her grove,
 Scorched by the unveiled glory of his face.

Danae I pictured in the cloud of gold,
 And Io guarded by the hundred eyes.
Leto, still flying from the serpent's fold :
 Leda, to whom the swan for safety flies.

On the one side fair Aphrodite bent
 Over Adonis, bathing him with tears :
Near them flew bright-winged Eros, almost spent
 With speeding to free Psyche from her fears.

Sad Ariadne showed I on the shore,
Whom vine-crowned Bacchus gladdens with his smiles ;
And panting Demeter, who flies no more,
But falls a victim to Poseidon's wiles.

Close by, the Sea-god his blue realm forsakes
Once more, in Pallas' shrine Medusa wooing ;
Whose glorious tresses turn to writhing snakes,
While her seared beauty proves the world's undoing.

On the left side the rosy Queen of Dawn
I wrought, with young Tithonus in her car ;
While Dian, by her silver coursers drawn,
Wounded Orion carries to his star.

Daphne was there, from swift Apollo flying.
Almost is lost her maiden liberty,
When the high gods take pity on her crying,
And change her virgin beauty to a tree.

34 SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

Far down, among the tangled water-weeds,
Nereus and Doris joined in amorous play.
Hermes I drew, who fair Larunda leads
Hell-ward, but stops to woo her on the way.

Lower than all, beneath the central waves,
Painted I Pluto and lost Proserpine ;
Who backward looks beyond the Stygian caves,
Sighing for light and freedom, corn and wine.

Others there were ; and all was bordered round
With a fair pattern free as ocean's flow.
Tints that no cunning weaver yet had found
I blended like a smile of sunrise glow.

I lived but for my work. All day I toiled :
All night I dreamt of all that I had wrought.
Sometimes I woke in dread that it was spoiled :
Sometimes new light my troubled visions brought.

At last 'twas finished. Wonderingly I gazed.

“Surely,” I thought, “this work will stir the skies!”

My father, lover, friends—all stood amazed.

They spoke not, or spake only with their eyes.

I blamed the lingering year for its delay,

Counting each moment of its laboured flight.

I slept beside my treasure : all the day

I gazed on it, and ofttimes in the night.

Then the time came, and soon I sought the wood,

Pride on my face, and triumph in my hand ;

And lo ! I knew that she before me stood :

Unseen, I felt the awe of her command.

Almost I knelt to her, and owned my pride ;

But then rose up the dreams of my renown,

And so the whispered warning I defied.

Triumph I would, despite her triple crown.

36 SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

She smiled, and reached her hand, and at her feet
 I spread my work. Long looked she, and I saw
Wonder in her eyes. Truly, 'twas triumph sweet !
 She seemed to search in vain to find a flaw.

At length she spoke to me. Her voice seemed kind,
 And yet I trembled, troubled in my breast.
“Maiden,” she said, “I have no fault to find :
 Thy work is good—yea, better than man’s best.

“But thou hast yet to learn how small a part
 Man’s pride plays in the sovereignty of Heaven.
Better than skilful hand is gentle heart :
 Better than boastful deed is service given.

“Maiden, no blame is judged thee for thy worth :
 The fault is in thy using of the gift ;
That thou, a feeble creature of the Earth,
 Darest against a god thy strength to lift.”

Still was there time, if I had sought her grace ;
But I was mad, and challenged her to show
Her promised work. Then darker grew her face,
Her eyes shot flame, frowns lowered on her brow.

“Behold,” she said, “the labour of a night !
Can thy work match with it, that took so long ?
Thou, who dost ape the secrets of the light,
Canst thou do anything so fine yet strong ?”

She pointed to a tree whereon was spread
A spider’s web, all jewelled with bright rain.
“What is thy boasted work to this ?” she said.
“Scorner of gods, now learn that pride is vain !”

She took my work, my cherished work, the toil
Of many months, and tore it into strands :
Then trampled it into the damp, dark soil,
While I shrieked out, and cursed, and wrung my hands.

38 SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

Then fell I in a swoon upon the ground,
 And when I wakened she was no more there.
My work lay where she left it, scattered round
 In filthy fragments, mocking my despair.

Raging I rose, in impotence to cry—
 “O gods, O devils, creatures of blind hate,
Where is the boasted justice of the sky?
 Witness your wrong that drives me to my fate!”

All I held dear had fled with my lost hope—
 Lover and friends and home. With eager haste
My tattered work I made into a rope,
 Twisting and knotting all its glorious waste.

Madness was mine. I could not bear to live
 After my loss. Sweet, also, was the thought
That haply to the gods my death might give
 Some pangs of pain for all the woe they'd wrought.

I chose the branch where she her web had spun,
The very branch of that accursèd tree.
I leaped from it, but ere my rope might run
A shining hand reached out and held me free.

Once more I looked into her flaming eyes.
"O fool," she said, "death is no cure for pride !
Learn from this humble creature to be wise :
Work as she works, and study by her side."

She raised her hand, and I could feel the fret
Of change pass through me like a sudden flame.
My rope spread out into a silken net :
I shrank into this loathsome shape of shame.

No more she spake, but vanished in her cloud.
Also I vanished : none knew what had been,
Nor could I tell : better my living shroud
Hid me than death, for I was sometimes seen.

So passed I to this prison-house of night :

So was the door nailed down upon my doom.

I know not for how long, nor if the light

Of distant dawn will ever reach my gloom.

Like a live thing among the dead I creep,

Shut from remembrance, yet remembering all.

The busy world lies in a heavy sleep,

The world I knew, nor answers when I call.

Sometimes my old companions round me run;

Racing the withered leaves the wind hath tossed.

I hear their laughter, and I watch their fun :

I wonder if they think me dead or lost.

I see my lover wandering in the wood :

He passes me—I cannot make him hear.

He knows not who I am : his shivering blood

Turns at my sight—I who was once so dear !

ARACHNE

41

I weary of my labour. Still my mind
Survives the shock of change : my former skill
Yet trembles to my touch ; but here I find
No freedom—I must work another's will.

Will the gods never count me with the past ?
These loathly creatures have their day and die :
Earth gathers them. Am I alone to last ?
Must my foul fingers never cease to ply ?

Would that the angered goddess might relent !
Have I not borne enough ? Is not my pride
Purged of its poison by my punishment ?
Comes there no pardon from a Heaven defied ?

I wait and watch : through darkness and through day
My cry goes up—ever my silent cry,
Heard only by the gods to whom I pray,
Haply by Pallas heard in her far sky.

SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

Haply she hears me : haply she will come :

Haply my cry will reach her pardoning ears.

O Pallas, come to me from thy blue dome !

O come with smiles, and dry my bitter tears !

O Pallas, come with smiles ! My pride is dead !

Is not the sorrow equal to the wrong ?

Give me the love that's lost, the joy that's fled !

O Pallas, come with smiles, nor linger long !

O Pallas, come with smiles ! My pride is gone !

Give me my banished life and joy again !

Let thy light shine on me as once it shone !

Come, and with smiles of pardon end my pain !

O Pallas, come ! I care not for renown !

My pride is dead—I only ask for peace !

O Pallas, come with smiles ! Or with a frown

Strike me, that from my trouble I may cease !

TITHONUS

THE STORY OF TITHONUS

A BEAUTIFUL youth, brother of the King of Troy. Eos, goddess of the dawn, falls in love with him, and beseeches the gods to grant him immortality. This they agree to do, but, as the goddess has forgotten to ask for eternal youth also, Tithonus grows old and decrepit, and, though longing for death, cannot die. Eos rises each morning from the river Oceanus, which encircles the flat world, and beyond whose farther bank is the abode of the dead.



TITHONUS

I WHO, if nature had been left her way,
Should now be sleeping in the Trojan soil :
I, the old dotard spent and dried,
Whom gods and men alike deride—
Lo, the soul left in me doth rage and boil,
In impotent vexation night and day !

I slumber, so they tell me, day and night ;
Yet sometimes, so they say, I wake to rave.
I know not, for my life doth seem
Like a far-off and tangled dream.
I seldom crawl beyond this oozy cave
By the great stream that girdles Earth and light.

46 SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

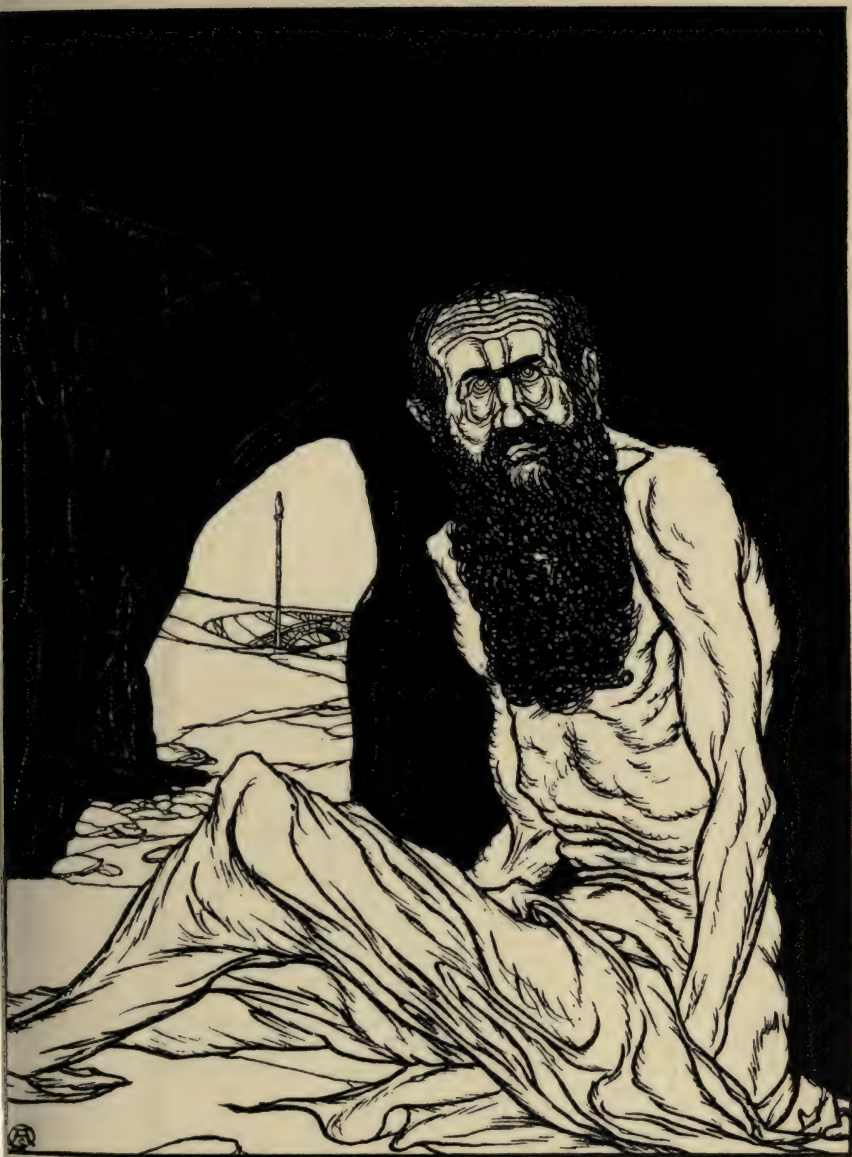
Here dwells the cloudy one, my goddess-wife ;
My goddess-wife, the ruler of the dawn ;
The rosy-limbed, who each morn flies
With the same message to the skies.—

I would great Jove her car had backward drawn
Down to deep hell before she spoiled my life !

I know not if my voice can stir the air :

I know that I am almost dead to sense :
That to my sight the sun is blind,
And deaf are river-rush and wind ;
Yet to my soul it were some recompense
If I could tell the tale of my despair.

Some one might hear me : some one who might tell
High Jove how I have suffered, and how long.
Scarce do I know, yet sometimes feel
My loose skin slipping like an eel
Round my lean flanks—I, who was once so strong !
Sure, if he knew, great Jove would break his spell !



They say the sacred gods, though strong, are just,
And that they hold the scales of judgment even.—
Curst be the fool who told this lie!
Men are but puppets of the sky!
Jove witness that I asked no boon of Heaven:
It was not I who knelt to him in lust!

Yet the gods pardon me, if they should hear!
Fool that I am to rant upon my pain!
Haply they may increase my score
Another thousand years or more.
Only I wither: my eternal chain—
The chain of my soul's choice—keeps strong and clear.

I languish for the everlasting rest
That suffers no rough shock in its abiding:
The darkness dead to eye and ear,
Unstirred by dreams of hope or fear:
No shadow-haunted nook, no ghostly hiding,
No whisper that can startle brain or breast.

Here our dreams haunt us : our profoundest sleep
Is still watched over by our consciousness,
Whose pale lamp, flickering in the breath
Of life, lights all that mimics death.
We feel Earth's hand upon us : our distress
And joy still listen—still we laugh or weep.

I ask so little—only for the peace,
The common peace, that comes to rich and poor ;
What all men have save I alone—
I, the gods' jest, the hapless one !
Only to me is closed the common door
Through which men vanish when 'tis time to cease.

Only to me the years are blind and mute :
Across their dusky waves I see no sail.
No Charon waits with muffled blades
To scull me to the land of shades.
I wot if I could hear his ghostly hail,
'Twere sweeter music than Apollo's lute !

Are the gods deaf and blind? Am I forgot?

Shall I lie here while countless seasons change?

Shall my bound soul for ever fret

While suns unreckoned rise and set?—

While all the world is free to roam and range,
Must I alone in this deep darkness rot?

Once I was young and gay, and blithely fared

As a Spring morn, no cloud my blue to dim.

Men called me strong, and swift in race,

And women wondered at my face.

Broad-backed was I, and tall, and lithe of limb:

Fresh as the dawn in hue, and amber-haired.

Rank, too, was mine, as scion of a king;

And wealth beyond the measure of my hand.

In all my sky there was no rift;

And fortune, for a crowning gift,

Gave me the fairest maiden in the land,

Whose charms our minstrels never tired to sing.

Then, when my day was brightest, darkness came.

One morn, while hunting in a distant wood,

I saw a rosy cloud float down,

Like gossamer by breezes blown,

And soon a wondrous form before me stood—

A woman's form, which yet was misty flame.

It was a vision lovelier than a dream—

A mingling of pale pearl and opaline,

Faint-flushed as when the morning mist

By a last lingering star is kissed ;

And through her blushing cloud she seemed to shine

As when the waking worlds with sunlight gleam.

Pale in the rosy mist that robed her round

A star of morning floated crystal-clear,

Whose silver beams made yet more fair

The tangled treasure of her hair.

One shapely arm I saw, which served to steer

Her cloudy car until it touched the ground.

Around her, as she floated, rose a scent
Of fresh Spring flowers ; and ever, as I listened,
Came music : all the air was stirred
With song of insect and of bird.
Dewdrops upon her brow like jewels glistened,
And sparkled with each movement as she went.

Spellbound I gazed, and wondered much to see
That when her shadowy shape had reached the earth
Firmer its glory seemed to grow,
As from a dream things waking show ;
Till from the cloud a perfect form stepped forth,
Bright with the beauty of divinity.

Never such loveliness in Earth or skies
Was dreamed of, yet it filled my heart with fear.
A little stream between us made
A rippling passage through the glade :
Across it, while I gazed, she floated near,
And nearer, till I looked into her eyes.

SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

She smiled on me, and lo! 'twas like a fire :

She touched me, and my senses from me fled :

She spoke to me, and all my soul

Lay naked as an open scroll,

And all my former dreams like leaves were shed.

I was as withered grass to her desire.

“Fair youth,” she smiling said, “and greatly loved,

Come with me to my home in yonder Heaven.

Fain would I bear thee from this Earth,

Whose passing pleasures mock thy worth.

Joy shall be thine that but to few is given.

Come, and my promise shall be sweetly proved.”

Her rosy hand upon my brow she laid :

I trembled, yet strange rapture held me bound.

She kissed me, and soft lightning seemed

To stir my senses while they dreamed.

One cloudy arm about my neck she wound :

Half was I glad, and half I was afraid.

"O youth," she said, "here is but idle strife.

Faint is Earth's fleeting joy, and dark with storm,

And its best smiles are dimmed with tears ;

But the gods bend not to the years,

Nor follow they the shadow for the form.

Come with me yonder, and I'll show thee life."

She smiled on me, and I smiled back again :

She kissed me, and I kissed her in return.

Forgotten were my race and kind,

And the fond bride I'd left behind :

All was forgotten I had lived to learn,

Country and home—love, joy, ambition, pain.

Something beyond my will, or choice, or aim,

Wrought me and bound me. Mind and body bent

Whither she pleased. The why and where

I knew not, asked not, might not care.

'Twas with me as with dreams. My wonderment

Was the poor moth's that cannot fly the flame.

56 SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

“O youth,” she said again, and to her breast
Drew me with soft white arms in close embrace,
“Thou knowest not how long my love
Hath watched thee from my clouds above,
Wooing unseen thy more than mortal grace ;
And now I can no longer from thee rest.

“O youth, thy life is but a little span,
While mine is as the circle of the sky.
Fain would I win immortal life
For him I choose to call me wife ;
And lo ! I could not bear to see thee die :
Thou art too fair to wither like a man.

“Fain would I bear thee to the grove of fire,
That Jove may touch thee with his sovereign rod—
The flaming rod whose crimson rays
Either give death or length of days.
Dar’st thou to fly with me, and from the god
Win the divinity of love’s desire ?”

She smiled on me as never woman smiled :

She fondled me as never maid caressed :

She kissed me, and each burning kiss

Seemed painful in its perfect bliss.

I could not speak to her, but it was guessed
I yielded—utterly was I beguiled.

So passed my soul from all that it had known.

She bore me in her car of rosy cloud

Until we reached the starry grove

Fringing the mystic throne of Jove.

Voices I heard, and music soft yet loud,
Like far-off thunder down the distance blown.

Then entered we the presence of the god :

I saw no form, but only heard a voice.

“ Ruler supreme of Earth and Air,”

She cried, “ O smile upon my prayer !

Immortal make this mortal of my choice.—

Lo, thou hast but to touch him with thy rod ! ”

Then came an answer from the misty throne,

Faintly as floats the echo of a sound—

“Daughter, I hear and grant thy boon.”

Then fell I in a wondrous swoon,

Dreamless and dark, and, waking from it, found

The strength of many men in blood and bone.

And then methought a sound of merriment,

Laughter from mocking voices, round us stirred ;

Whereat my Queen, with lifted hand,

Turned back to make a fresh demand ;

And from his thunder Jove's reply was heard—

“Thou hast thy wish, and thou must be content.”

So from the cloudy presence of high Jove

We fled, and rested in this cave of night.

Each morn she bore me in her car

Through rosy mist from star to star,

While all the waking worlds she clothed with light ;

And I was well-contented with her love.

Sometimes to Earth she carried me a while,
The old grey Earth of my forgotten life ;
And in the sunshine of green woods
There came to me remembered moods ;
But she would ever play the watchful wife,
Nor let me wander farther than her smile.

Yea, if I strayed beyond her, brooding-bent,
To muse upon some half-remembered pain,
Soon her soft arms were round me folded,
And sweet as Summer storm she scolded,
While smiles and kisses made blue sky again.
Great love and ease I had, and was content.

So passed the days and weeks, the months and years :
Not like the old life, notched with marks of travel,
A tablet blurred with joy and sorrow.
We knew no day, and no to-morrow :
Time had no crease, no tangle to unravel :
Smiles were not reckoned since we had no tears.

60 SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

The years had glided from me like a stream
 Flowing in sunlight where no ripples break :
 A cloudless sky, a waveless sea,
 Joy that seemed of eternity ;
 And so I reckoned not : until we wake,
We think not what hath pleased us is a dream.

I knew not how time ran : the very name
 I had forgot : lost was the thought to count ;
 But by degrees a motion strange
 Stirred in me : I could feel a change,
 As though my blood were loitering in its fount,
As though my life were flickering in its flame.

And with the change came back the faded past :
 For the first time I reckoned with my strength.
 I knew the deathless gift was mine,
 A measure from the gods' own wine ;
 And yet my chain was running to its length,
The river of my life was flowing fast.

Something remembered, like a tale re-told,
 Something that had awakened from long sleep,
 Whispered the wonder in my ears,
 Showed me the shadow of the years.
Down the smooth glass of Time I watched it creep,
And suddenly I knew that I was old.

Also it came to me—nor seemed so long
 The wake of time—that my once jealous mate
 Had grown less watchful day by day,
 Heeding not if I chose to stray.
I shivered, for the thought was full of fate :
'Twas proof that I no more was fair or strong.

I knew not if to weep or to be glad.
 My life was one blue sky without a cloud :
 'Twas as the gods are, save their gift
 Of freedom—nought to sow or sift.
I only sat and wondered in a shroud
Of ghostly dreams that almost drove me mad.

62 SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

And so my goddess found me. With her touch
I woke, and told her what disturbed my mind.

She laughed, then sighed, and said—"O loved,
Hast thou the bitter secret proved?

Hast thou stripped off the robe of youth to find
That the years hold thee in their cruel clutch?"

"Methought," I said, "Jove gave me at thy suit
The gift of life." "Yea," answered she, "'tis truth;
But heard'st thou not, when it was given,
The laughter of the gods in Heaven
Because I had forgot to ask for youth?
Alas! what is the tree without its fruit?"

Then groaned I like a man who sees his doom
Written upon the sky in flaming letters.
"O goddess," in my rage I cried,
"Life and the gods thou hast defied!
No hand can free me from these deathless fetters!
No light can pierce this everlasting gloom!"

“Nay,” she replied, “yield not to grief so soon :
Yet from his throne may Jove in pity lean.
Think, too, although our day is gone,
The sun was glorious while it shone.
’Tis something to remember joy that’s been :
Sweet are old thoughts as waves beneath the moon.”

She smiled, and I laughed out in bitterness
So sharply that she started at the sound.
“’Twere worth,” I cried, “a goddess-wife
To grovel here a cycle’s life,
Deaf, blind, and witless, creeping on the ground,
Watching the world trip by in buxomness !”

“Alas,” she said, “and thou wert once so fair !
Never met I thy peer in mortal man,
Nor ever loved I one like thee !”
Then said I—“Is the change in me
So wondrous? Let me my own wreckage scan.
Fain would I pay my reckoning to despair.”

She sighed, then bore me to a river's brim,
And on the water shed her silver sheen,
Making a mirror clear and bright,
Then held me prone above the light ;
And lo ! I was the oldest man yet seen,
Yea, and the ugliest—shrivelled, shapeless, grim !

I shuddered, and then said—" It is enough :
Thou didst the wrong, and I must bear the blame.
The gods made man to be their toy :
What their heads plan their hands destroy.
They fan the fire, and then they quench the flame :
When the sea sleeps their storm-winds make it rough."

"Take hope from this," she said : " there is no day
Without its night : all things are born and die :
The fairest flower, the humblest grass,
Springs from its seed to bloom and pass :
Nature hath but one law for Earth and Sky :
Even to gods the years bring slow decay."

Mocking, I said—"If thou wouldst help my woe,
Take me to thy dark cave, which fits my mood.
No more bright river or green field
Can comfort to my sadness yield.
In its own hell my hopeless soul would brood,
And pray the pitiless gods to let it go!"

She laughed, and bore me to her river-cave,
As I had begged her. Seldom after this
Saw I her face; and, being alone,
The days I counted, one by one,
Nor mattered it how many I might miss;
And sometimes I would wander from my grave.

Sullen I wandered whither I would stroll,
For she no longer kept me by her side;
Nor troubled, when she sailed afar,
To take me in her cloudy car.
Worn though I was, 'twas wounding to my pride:
Still to my body's wreckage clung my soul.

66 SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

Best loved I by the girdling stream to walk,
 And watch the thick, dark mist that loomed beyond,
 Wall-like upon the farther side,
 Where the imprisoned dead ones glide.
It fretted me I could not break the bond
Between us, and hear something of their talk.

At first, I know not for how many years,
 When my grief still was fresh, and soft my heart,
 I spent my time in idle prayers,
 Trusting the gods would heed my cares ;
But in a while I wearied of the part :
'Tis hard to pray when we can shed no tears.

Long while I used to look into this stream,
 Dark though it was, to note my changing face—
 My withered locks, my wrinkled skin,
 Decrepitude that seemed a sin ;
And at the ghost of each departed grace
My wrath would laugh as one laughs in a dream.

I think my goddess-wife had half forgotten
My presence, for it shamed her not to bring
Fresh lovers. Up the slimy steep,
Where the cave narrows, would I creep
To hide my pain. Yet troubled me the sting
Of envy, though my flesh was old and rotten.

I laughed to watch them tangled in her mesh,
Although their fooling added to my grief.
It was but for a little while
They sunned them in her changeful smile :
Then fell they from her, dropping leaf by leaf.
I laughed, and yet my wrath rose ever fresh.

But that was in grief's noon : now is all dark
To eyes and ears, almost to touch and taste.
Still stand I like a sentinel
Long dead, with none my tale to tell.
Like an old watch-dog am I in my waste,
With nothing left me but a piteous bark.

68 SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

Companionless I brood in my own night,
Worse than the dead that walk among the dead.
Ever my living ghost doth rave,
Self-haunted, in its flesh-bound grave.
No window lights my lonely prison-bed :
There is no door for entrance or for flight.

Sometimes I curse the gods who left me here ;
And sometimes, hoping for their ruth, I bless.
Sometimes I wonder if the blot
Of all I suffer is forgot,
Or if they hide them from my loathsomeness.
Little I hope from them, and less I fear.

Sullen I sit, or crawl along the sands,
Groping my way beyond the slimy sedge.
I hear not my own voice, scarce feel
The biting rock ; yet still I kneel
Shivering upon the river's shadowy ledge,
And to the silent gods lift up my hands.

Ever I call on them—all night, all day.

I know not if they hear, nor if their wrath

My raving stirs; nor do I care:

No blow can fall I fear to bear.

So that I go, I reckon not of the path:

Welcome what doom they will except to stay!

Welcome Jove's thunderbolts that crack the sky!

Welcome his fiercest wrath on lightning driven!

Welcome from earth, or sea, or flame,

His sharpest shaft to end my shame!

Welcome whatever's worst in Hell or Heaven—

I care not, so it strike me and I die!



THE SONG OF HERMES

THE STORY OF THE SONG OF HERMES

HERMES, the messenger of the gods, bears the souls of the dead to Pluto the god of hell.

Ixion, King of the Lapithæ, to avoid paying the bridal gifts promised to his father-in-law, treacherously murders the latter at a banquet. As no one will purify Ixion of this deed, Zeus (Jupiter) takes pity on him, carries him to heaven, and purifies him. Ixion once more acts treacherously, and tries to win the love of the queen of heaven. As a punishment for his ingratitude Zeus orders Hermes to bind him to a wheel which never ceases rolling, and even after he is dead the punishment is continued in the lower world.

Tantalus, King of Lydia, is specially honoured by visits from the gods, being received in return at their banquets. He is accused of stealing the sacred food and wine, and also of divulging the secrets entrusted to him by Zeus. He is further accused of killing his own son, and offering him as food to the gods at a banquet. He is punished in hell by excessive thirst. A lake at his feet always flows away from him when he stoops to drink, and a bunch of luscious fruit suspended over his head always springs out of reach when his lips seek to seize it.

Sisyphus, King of Corinth, whose wisdom at first makes his city prosperous, becomes noted for cunning and cruelty. He kills strangers by hurling rocks on them from the hills as they traverse the narrow Isthmian road. When Zeus carries off Ægina, the daughter of the river-god Asopus, Sisyphus discovers her hiding-place to her father. For his many crimes he is punished in hell by having to roll up a steep slope a rock which always falls back just as it reaches the top.



THE SONG OF HERMES

I, HERMES, messenger of cloud-capped Jove,
Was passing with a soul
Down the dark rent of Earth whose rocky clove
Dips to the waters foul
Of reeking Styx. There, by the muddy stairs,
The grisly boatman waits
To ferry, one by one, the shivering fares
Bound for the Hellish gates.
And lo! as I was stepping to his boat,
I heard a woeful wind
Creep through the caves, and past the river float,
Telling of grief behind

SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

Beyond the common burden of the doomed.

Wondering, my glance I turned
Far down to where the sinful are entombed,
And, midst the rocks that burned
Quenchless, I saw three forms half hid by flames,

With arms that upward tossed
In pain. Then asked I Charon for their names,
And wherefore they were lost ?

“O Swift One,” answered he, “some while ago
Thou broughtest these to Hell ;
And how they sinned, and why they suffer woe,
Needs not my tongue to tell.”

“Nay,” I replied, “I have too many brought
To note down every one.

Tell me what these three wretched souls have wrought,
And when their deeds were done ?”

But he, being sullen, answered not again.

Therefore, as I came back,
I followed where those doleful sounds of pain
Swept from a slanting crack ;

And presently I reached a high-domed cave
 Lighted by forks of fire,
Wherein three writhing Shades ceased not to rave
 With cries half grief, half ire.
Each wore a crown upon his shaggy head :
 From each a bloody sweat
Flowed down : on each pale face the hope lay dead :
 On each despair was set.

One to a seven-spoked wheel was firmly bound
 With sorely-fraying chains ;
And as it spun through air, or swept the ground,
 It caused him bitter pains.
He gasped for breath, so random was the pace
 The unsteered circle flew ;
And there was sweat of terror on his face—
 A terror ever new.

A second Shadow up a slippery slope
 Unceasing pushed a stone,
Which always as it reached the rocky cope
 Slid to the bottom zone ;

And he would curse his fate, the gods, and Hell :

Then try the task again ;

But ever as it gained the top it fell :

Ever his toil was vain.

The third stood on a bank beside a pool,

And ripe fruit o'er him hung.

Hot flames so scorched him that he longed to cool

With fruit or waves his tongue.

But when the stream flowed near enough to sip,

Backward it fled the brink ;

And when the fruit bent almost to his lip,

Beyond his reach 'twould shrink.

Like a weird wind he moaned, yet seldom cursed,

But ever in his grief

Would beg the gods to end his burning thirst,

Or give his pain relief.

Him with the wheel addressed I first, and asked

What wonder he might be ?

And for what sin thus strangely he was tasked ?

Then, breathless, answered he—

"O Winged One, who didst bind me to this wheel,

Thou knowest all my state.

Hast thou come here to mock at what I feel?

To wanton with my fate?

If not, when thou returnest to thy lord,

I pray thee for my speed

To tell him I repent my broken word,

And my accursèd deed.

Wretched Ixion, loathed of gods, am I,

Who my bride's father slew

For lust of gain; when to the pardoning sky

Jove, pitying, with me flew,

And purged me from the poison of my sin;

And lo! a traitor still,

His heavenly consort laboured I to win

To my presumptuous will.

Then to this cursèd circle was I bound,

Which by some unseen force

Rushed through the sky, or ran along the ground,

In never-ending course.

Oft was I blistered by the burning sun,
And oft in cloudy cold
I shivered : now through desert thirst I spun :
Now past sharp rocks I rolled.
Sometimes would furious beasts beside me race,
Snapping with fierce-fanged jaw :
Sometimes the ravenous birds my limbs or face
Plucked at with beak and claw.
At last my body yielded up its breath,
Yet kept my soul its spell,
For still the gods, unsatisfied with death,
Eked out my doom in Hell.
O Winged One, if my sorrow moves thy tears,
When thou dost upward wend,
Bid Jove take measure of the heavy years,
And give my grief an end !"

He broke off with a sigh, and then once more
His wheel, whose speed had grown
Less while we talked, raced wildly as before.
Then sought I to be shown

The fate of him who rolled the rounded rock
Only to let it fall.

He sullen answered—"Comest thou to mock,
O stealer from the stall?

Or is the gossip of the gods so stale,
Is Heaven so scandal-free,

That thou hast time to listen to a tale
Which thou couldst tell to me?

Is Sisyphus by the high gods forgotten?

He that kept Corinth's gate:

He that on Earth was by cross winds begotten,
Then Hell-ward blown by fate.

Thou, who art lackey to the lustful lord,
Well knowest thou that Jove

Doomed me to suffer for my whispered word
Which showed his wanton love—

Yea, when he stole Ægina from her sire,

The hidden maid I sought:

Therefore have I to bear his cursèd ire,

And not for sins I wrought."

He paused, and stooped his half-spent rock to turn,

While I in wrath replied—

“’Tis not for thee the Highest One to spurn,

Thou who hast doubly lied !

So many were thy crimes ’tis hard to tell

For which thy doom atones,

But chiefly for those trusting souls who fell

Beneath thy traitorous stones !”

He laughed, and answered—“O small deity,

Thou flatterest my wit

That my worn fangs have made a mark on thee,

For plainly thou art bit !

’Tis worthy of the master and the slave

To cover private spite

Beneath a public wrong ! The gods are brave

When panoplied in might !”

Once more he paused, and then went on again—

“When thou art back in Heaven,

Tell Jove I ask no pity for my pain.

The chain that he hath riven

May snap with rust, and I drop limb from limb—

Yea, and his cursèd rod

Break in his hand—before I bend to him,

Or own him for my god ! ”

He turned his back on me, and once more rolled

His heavy rock up-hill.

Some force, it seemed, his stubborn pride controlled,

Superior to his will.

Then to the third sad Shade I gently spake,

Whose sorrow Hell might move :

He whose hot lips bent longing to the lake,

Or else reached up to prove

The luscious fruit that ever seemed to burst

Into his burning mouth,

Yet ever as he thought to cool his thirst

Sprang back and mocked his drouth.

He waited not my speech, but eager cried,

With withered hands outspread—

“O messenger of Jove, whom I defied,

Tell him my pride is dead!

Tell him that I am humbled and repent!

Tell him what I have been,

And what I am! O thou who hast been sent,

Tell him what thou hast seen!”

He paused, half musing on his present grief,

Half on his joys of old:

Then spake again, as though 'twere some relief

To have his sorrows told.

“Once, as thou know'st, within my royal hall

Gods were my guests, and I

(How fearful from high Heaven to Hell the fall!)

Was welcomed in their sky.

Thence sprung my pride—the lust that stirred my soul

To share in things divine,

Till from the table of the gods I stole

The sacred food and wine.

Also the secrets of the mystic space,

The hidden of the years,

Trusted to me by Jove's indulgent grace,

I whispered in vain ears.

Sufficient was my sin ; but that foul deed

Which false tongues fixed on me,

That I gave gods my slaughtered son to feed—

There let Jove hold me free.

What were the all-wise gods if I, a man,

Could trick them to my bent ?

Enough the sin that brought on me their ban !

Enough my punishment !”

He stopped and sighed, then said—“ O son of Jove,

If I must suffer still

This torment, let so far my anguish move

Through thee the Heavenly will,

That I may reach this water once a day,
And moisten with this fruit
My burning lips. Be pitiful, and pray
Great Jove to grant my suit !”

Even as he spake red flames were upward tossed,
Which scorched his outstretched hand,
As though to make amends for torture lost,
Held back at my command.
Silence I kept, and soon their toilsome round
Once more the sad Three took,
While, heavy with their pain, the mournful sound
Hell’s vaulted darkness shook.
Slowly I left them, with bent head, and brow
Clouded with thought ; and still
Their wail came after me, like winds that blow
In Winter down a hill.

Glad was I when I reached the sable stream
Where the weird boatman lay.

'Twas almost like the stumbling from a dream
 Into the track of day.
Loudly I Charon hailed, then in his barge
 Crossed through the murk of night.
A sudden loathing seized me of Hell's marge,
 A longing for the light.

Half through the river Charon stopped, and said—
 “O thou of nimble wings,
Art thou contented with the music dread
 Of the three rueful Kings?”
“O Charon,” said I, “neither man nor god,
 Tranquil as thine own boat,
Whose rotting timber countless souls have trod,
 Yet never sounds sad note—
Happier art thou than men, whose passions strong
 Fill Earth with poisonous weeds!
Happier than gods, who have to punish wrong
 Sprung from immortal seeds!”
Then Charon laughed, and said—“O son of Heaven,
 Simple am I, and old,

And well is it Jove's sceptre was not given
 My foolish hands to hold,
Seeing that sorrow moves me more than sin,
 Pity than punishment :
Wherefore my judgment were not like to win
 From the wise gods content."

Nothing I answered for a while, for nought
 Came ready to my wit ;
And when I spoke 'twas like a half-winged thought
 That lacks the force to hit.
" Prate not," I said, " of things thou dost not know ;"
 And then we spake no more,
For soon his crazy craft its blistered prow
 Struck on the farther shore.

Upward I climbed or flew through darkness blind
 Till I drew near Earth's gate,
And ever as I went that woeful wind
 Sang its dread dirge of fate.

THE SONG OF HERMES

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Pausing before the portal whence I came,
My glance far downward fell
Where, like a shadow islanded in flame,
Lay the dark realm of Hell.



THE SONG OF SAPPHO

THE STORY OF SAPPHO

PHAON, an old and ugly boatman, is changed by Aphrodite (Venus) into a beautiful youth as a reward for ferrying her across the sea when she has no money to pay his fare. The famous poetess, Sappho, falls in love with Phaon, and, being rejected by him, throws herself from the Leucadian Rock, a promontory in the Ionian Sea. On its crest stands a temple of Apollo, and at the annual festival to the god criminals are cast from the rock into the sea. Despairing lovers, also, throw themselves from it to escape their grief.



THE SONG OF SAPPHO

THE night has spent itself in storm : the day
Breaks with the first faint flush of Spring,
Like hope grown pale with lingering.
In wood and field a brighter sheen
Gladdens the grey of Winter's green.
The blossoming world leaps forth with laughter gay,
Like childhood tripping out of school to play.

The air is full of scent, the woods of song.
Dimpled with laughter are the hills,
And murmurs float from mountain rills.
From Nature's temple rises clear
The incense of the budding year.
Once more the earth with lusty life is strong,
While, threading the blue air, winged legions throng.

Now is the sea all smiles and gentleness.

No longer battling with the shock

Of billows, slumber cliff and rock.

Skimming the waves white sea-gulls fly,

Wild with the joy of sea and sky.

Soon the fair Nereids show their buxomness,

Combing the tangle from each azure tress.

A little stream runs rippling to the shore,

Brimful of music as a bird

Whose longing lusty Spring has stirred.

The rocky banks are gay with flowers,

And ferns kept cool by fairy showers.

Ever it runs and sings, until the roar

Of breaking billows bids it sing no more.

The billows are but pulsings from afar :

Soon, gladdened with the noontide heat,

The heart of ocean calms its beat.

Soon the wind drops, the waves and trees

Stir softly to a light-blown breeze.

Gem-like, the islands gleam beyond the bar :

High in the blue the Sun-god drives his car.

Down by the beach, half-lolling in his boat,

An old man sits, his ugly shape

Scarce hidden by a tattered cape.

Never was human form or face

So barren of a human grace.

Hump-backed and spindled, shrunk, with loose-
skinned throat,

From which a thin grey goat-beard seems to float.

Soon his form stirs, and with a crazy voice
 He sings a snatch of song whose sound
 Startles the rocks. Then looks he round,
 And sudden stops with wondering smile,
 Doffing his cap in clumsy style.
Half shamed he looks, yet cannot help rejoice,
And then he kneels like one who has no choice.

Before him stands a maid so fair and bright
 He thinks she surely comes from Heaven,
 Since only there such grace is given.
 Her golden hair, wide-spreading, dims
 The glory of her radiant limbs.
Around her, trembling star-like, floats a light
That dazzles while it charms his eager sight.

She smiles on him, and then one rosy hand
Lays softly on his trembling arm.
“Feel not, O friend,” she says, “alarm.
Nought am I but a wandering maid,
A suppliant for thy skilful aid.
Lo, I would cross to yonder sea-girt land,
Yet for thy fare have nothing to command.”

Then the rough ferryman springs up, and cries
With a loud laugh—“O loveliest seen,
I took thee for a heavenly queen.
Step in my boat, and have no care :
Welcome art thou without a fare.
'Tis pay enough to look into thine eyes :
I wot there are none bluer in the skies !”

She smiles again, more sweetly than before ;
Then lightly steps into his boat,
And soon across the bay they float.
The sea before her smile grows still :
The skiff darts onward at her will :
The wondering boatman drops his useless oar :
Soon she steps out upon her island shore.

“Thanks for thy help,” she says. “’Twas but to prove
If my best jewel chanced to dwell
Beneath the roughness of thy shell ;
And now I give thee youth and grace
Beyond the measure of thy race.
Use well the gift I bring thee from above :
If thou wouldst keep my favour lose not love.”

She touches him, and lo ! as 'twere a shroud,
His loathsome mask is seen to fall,
And forth he steps, straight, comely, tall,
Fair both of form and countenance,
A youth in gesture and in glance.
He feels the change, leaps up, and calls aloud :
Then turns to thank her, and beholds a cloud.

A rosy cloud, already far away.
He kneels to it with lifted hands,
And swears to follow her commands :
Then, when he sees the shape no more,
Slowly he seeks the farther shore.
Youth's in his blood, his soul is strangely gay :
His strength is as a newly-risen day.

Great are his gifts : the goddess has not lied.

A new life flashes from beneath

The old blade rusting in its sheath.

Men praise his strength, and women vie

Their rival charms to win his eye.

Almost he has forgotten in his pride

The lame old man that waited on the tide.

One morn, when all the sea is bright with beams,

He meets a maiden sad of mien,

Unlike to any he has seen.

Her form is tall, and somewhat slight :

Her eyes gleam with a wondrous light.

She walks with half-bent head, like one that seems

Lost in a far imagining of dreams.

She is not fair as men count comeliness,
But more than beauty's common stamp
Moulds her pale face. 'Tis as a lamp
Illumined with an oil divine
Were bidden from her soul to shine.
Beauty she has, but hid too deep to guess,
And none the soul within her might confess.

And over all, like rich mould to a flower,
Spreading beneath the common soil,
Passion lies warm to make or spoil.
Her mother Earth has trowelled deep
While root and blossom lay asleep;
And now the bloom and fruit wait sun and shower,
Uncertain of the seed and of the sower.

Upon the shingled beach a step she hears,
And from her dreams looks up to see
A youth she deems divinity.
He smiles on her: she looks again,
And feels a joy like sudden pain.
'Tis as a hope that trembles with our fears,
A ray of sunshine sparkling through our tears.

Never has she beheld a form and face
So perfect: all her poet's sense
Beats through her brain with throb intense.
Like mist that melts before the sun,
Fade the fair dreams her soul has spun.
She has forgotten all things—time and place,
Yea, her own self—in worship of his grace.

Oft has she seen fair forms, oft felt love's fire,
But never form so fair as this
Has beckoned her to love's sweet bliss,
And never since love's message came
Has her heart been so seared with flame.
She looks at him with eyes that never tire :
Both life and death seem joined in her desire.

She wakens with his voice. "Fair maid," he says,
"Wilt thou not tell me who thou art?"
And she replies with trembling heart—
"My name is Sappho, and maybe
'Tis known to thee in poesy."
"Nay," he laughs back, "I have no skill in lays :
I never wander in the flowery ways."

She smiles, and blushing says—"Thou hast no need,

Since all the gods can give is thine.

Who wants the cup that hath the wine?

The lily troubles not to seek

The gold that gathers on its cheek.

Thou hast the fruit, and I but scatter seed :

The bloom is thine—I only train the weed."

He laughs, and says—"We cannot all be fair.

Thou hast thy poesy, a thing

Beyond the measure of my wing,

Though some esteem it worth the skin.

For me, far sooner would I win

Beauty and love—these count I worth my care.

The rest are only feathers in the air."

"Yea," answers she, "all Earth and Heaven are love!"

Her eyes glow with a sudden light,

Quick as a storm-flash in the night.

"Better is love than art or fame,"

She says, "though death be in its flame!

'Tis man's first gift: 'tis prized by gods above:

'Tis Earth's best music sung in sky or grove!"

He wonders at her passion, as men wonder

At some strange thing they see afar.

No more it stirs him than a star

Kindles the ocean's tranquil breast.

Her love for him is half confessed;

Yet can he only on her strangeness ponder,

Or gaze upon the waves that beat beyond her.

Her love is like a sunrise when a night
Of storm flares into sudden flush
Of crimson ; or a river's rush
Rock-ward, without a warning given ;
Or a quick star that leaps from heaven ;
Or a black thunder-cloud that breaks in light ;
Or a fierce wind of fever-breathing blight.

Time did not give the wound, and cannot mend it.
All in a moment has she found
The shaft that strikes her to the ground.
Her gaping heart takes little heed
To hide its hurt, but lets it bleed.
She would not keep her love, but sweetly spend it :
Her thirsty lips would drink until they end it.

Her love is hers—alas ! 'tis his as well ;
A passing bloom to pluck and fling,
The one fair blossom of her Spring.
She looks at him, and sighs, and longs,
And half finds freedom from her thongs.
Almost her beating heart has loosed its spell :
Almost her trembling lips their secret tell.

She looks once more, and once more hangs her head.
She is no timid woodland flower
That hides itself in leafy bower,
But all the more she feels the wind
That blows on her with breath unkind.
Her warmth is of the sun, while his is shed
From the pale moon, o'er snow and ocean spread.

At length, of her sweet sickness desperate,
She ventures with a blush on words.
Her trembling fingers sweep the chords
Of all she feels. She begs him say
If he can yield to love's dear sway,
Or if her passion pleads with him too late?
If her strange presence moves his love or hate?

Her music only falls on idle ears.
Either his soul of love is free,
Or will not open to her key.
He merely laughs, and says—"O maiden,
Why should my thoughts with thee be laden?
What have I said or done to cause thy tears?
I love thee not, nor hate thee—have no fears."

Sighing, she says—"Alas! can nothing move
Thy warmth? O youth, if I am bold,
Blame thine own heart that is so cold.
Seem I not fair? To boast is wrong,
Yet have men wooed me for my song—
Yea, many men of worth have sought my love,
But none that might my sleeping passion prove."

Through her bright tears she looks at him again,
But all her wealth of warmth is lost:
She cannot melt this bitter frost.
She takes his hand: her eager breath
As well might fan the cheek of death.
All her sweet wooing falls from him in vain:
He has no voice to answer to her pain.

He draws from her his hand with careless haste.

“Maiden,” he says, “we cannot make

Our love. I’m sorry for thy sake,

But truly thou art not my kind.

I am not one that worships mind.

Thou art too pale and thin to please my taste :

Better I like round limbs and swelling waist.”

Now is her pale face reddened with his blame.

“O youth, thou art the first to slight

My love,” she says, “and ’tis thy right ;

Yet is it wantonness to beat

The dog that fondles at thy feet ;”

And then she sighs, and says—“Alas the shame !

Alas that I must wither in thy flame !”

Slowly she leaves him, with bent head, and eyes

All full of tears ; and he once more

Saunters and sings along the shore.

The blue waves whisper in her ears,

And the soft wind would dry her tears ;

But she, poor maid ! is lost to sea and skies :

Only from her own troubled heart she flies.

Fain would she tame her heart, and quench its fire,

But all her efforts only fan

The flame : in vain is every plan.

Her deadly wound is past relief,

And so she gives the rein to grief.

Sad songs she sings upon her broken lyre,

The weird, wild music of her lost desire.

She cannot rest : she wanders where they met.

'Tis something to behold the place,
And linger where she saw his face ;
The wondrous marble of his form,
Unruffled by a breath of storm.

She sits and listens while the billows fret,
And wonders if her sorrow can forget.

One noon he comes again, and with a smile

Greets her. Hope leaps within her breast :
Once more she looks with love confessed ;
But then as quickly comes the sense
Of his unchanged indifference.

“Maiden,” he says, “wouldst thou an hour beguile ?
If so, I'll carry thee to yonder isle.”

She looks and longs with wistful wondering :

Then ventures—"Hast thou not forgot?"

"Nay," he replies, "I love thee not ;

But seeing thee as I passed by,

Methought thou wouldst like company ;

And, though I have small cunning in the thing,

I felt a sudden whim to hear thee sing."

She smiles on him, and steps into his boat.

"Yea," answers she, "well fits the time,

And I will sing a merry rhyme."

He starts, with eyes a moment bent

In doubt, then laughs with glad content.

"Thou speakest sense," he says, "and while we float

I'll listen to the song-bird in thy throat."

'Tis the same boat that he was wont to ply
While back, when he was bent and gray.
He has not sculled it since that day ;
And now his fancy or his fate,
Or the long use, that slumbered late,
Tempts him on board ; or else the radiant sky
Reminds him of his lost divinity.

Blue is the sea, and blue the sky above :
The gray rocks seem to laugh with light :
Sea-birds wing past in phantom flight.
Sappho sees nothing, or things seem
Like the strange happenings of a dream.
Laughter and song and dance stir sea and grove
While she is busy with her dying love.

Her comely boatman pauses for a rest,
While Sappho watches from her place,
Still the strange smile upon her face.
He begs her for her promised air :
She hears not, or she does not care.
Silent she sits, and broods within her breast,
Like a poor bird above its plundered nest.

He wonders at her silence : 'tis so weird
He breaks it not. At length they reach
A cliff-girt island, with a beach
Half pebbled and half yellow sand,
That runs up to the rugged land.
Near by a mighty rock is sky-ward reared
Straight from the sea, sharp-edged, and tempest-seared.

Then, as they step upon the shining shore,

Sappho from her long dream awakes :

At last her soul its silence breaks.

“O youth,” she says, “let not my pain

Still with thy pity plead in vain !

A single grain of all thy golden store

Thou shalt not miss, and I will ask no more !”

He stirs not, and his arm she trembling grips.

“O youth,” she pleads, “thou canst not miss

One gentle look, one touch, one kiss ;

Something to dream of ere I die,

And fool my fancy with its lie—

Yea, let thy poisoned honey swell my lips,

And dying love shall thank thee while it sips !”

He answers not, and she, all wild despair,
Flings down her passion at his feet.
“O youth,” she cries, “be kind, and cheat
My love, if only with a smile,
Till it grows gentle with thy guile;
Or thine own eyes deceive, and think me fair :
Believe that I am cold, and thou dost care !”

Now frowns he, weary of her clamouring.
“Maiden,” he says, “thou growest pale
With oft repeating of thy tale.
Why wilt thou be so deaf and blind ?
Have I not plainly shown my mind ?
And lo ! thou promised me to laugh and sing,
And the day’s spent in tears and vapouring !”

Then she leaps up and laughs, and says to him—

“Truly, O youth, I'll sing to thee

A song of love and destiny!

But not down here: it is too low

For my best notes to freely flow.

Wait for me while I climb: I have a whim

To sing from yonder rock so dark and grim.”

She looks at him a moment: then the steep

Climbs with slow steps, where winds a track

Upward and round the frowning stack.

He follows, wondering, down the sands,

Till underneath the rock he stands.

Far o'er his head he sees her figure creep

To the sheer height that shelves the dizzy deep.

Like a pale statue, on the topmost crest
 She stands, with arms high-raised, the wind
 Blowing her hair in streams behind.
 Far off, beyond the sea or sky,
 Something unseen commands her eye.
The waiting boatman notes her heaving breast
And trembling limbs, and wonders at the rest.

Then to the listening youth floats down a sound
 Of wondrous song. Across his soul
 Its waves of joy and sorrow roll.
 Never to music yet was given
 Such mingled strains of Earth and Heaven.
At last his sluggard sense has something found
That lifts it for a moment from the ground.

Her voice is of the living and the dead.

'Tis like the soul of some sad fate

In its own sorrow incarnate.

Never sang spirit its despair

In music garmented so fair.

'Tis like the dying glory that is shed

On sea and sky when a bright day has fled.

'Tis the wild swan-song of her troubled life

As a last flight her pinions take,

Ere she floats helpless in her lake.

Higher she soars, and louder swells

Her voice, as of her love she tells—

Her luckless love, which like a two-edged knife

Has cut the tangle of her passionate strife.

Behind her, on a mound, Apollo's shrine
Shows glorious in the sunset rays.
Kneeling, she turns to it, and prays—
"O brightest of the gods, whose gift
Doth from the dust our spirits lift,
Let the fair star thou gavest me still shine
In some far corner of thy realm divine!"

Then looks she down where rolls the restless sea,
And cries—"O Star of Ocean born,
Most glorious of the risen morn,
Thou who my wild heart deigned to fashion
From thine own flame of god-sprung passion—
Lo, I bring back thy gift of love to thee!
Let me find room in thy divinity!"

On the rock's edge, between the sea and sky,
She stands: her white arms upward reach,
Pleading with Heaven. From the far beach,
Deep down, her boatman sees her there:
Then notes a darkening of the air;
And then he hears a sudden splash, a cry:
Then all is still as when a storm goes by.

And then, while he is wondering of his way,
A strange light fills the gathering gloom,
The breathless air is hot with doom.
He feels the glorious presence near,
And fain would hide his trembling fear.
He longs to fly, yet knows that he must stay:
The night is come, and he has spent his day.

At length he dares to look upon her face.

Alas! no longer is it bright

With sunny smiles of heavenly light,

But dark with frowns and threatened wrath,

Fierce vengeance flaming in her path.

He shudders as he thinks that 'tis the place—

How changed all else!—where he received her grace.

He trembles at her voice: 'tis like a flame

That scorches him with every breath.

“O fool!” she says, “that dealest death

To my best singer out of Heaven,

Where is thy grace for favours given?

O worthless one, go back unto thy shame!

Be what thou wert—old, withered, loathsome, lame!”

Once more the vision fades into a cloud ;
And soon he feels a motion strange :
Through bone and blood there comes a change.
His life flows like a failing stream :
Gone is the glory of his dream—
Youth, strength, and beauty, all that made him proud !
He can but wring his hands and cry aloud.

He prays the goddess with uplifted hands
To look with pity on his pain,
To give him youth and grace again.
Alas ! from Heaven no message falls :
Only Earth answers when he calls.
In vain he kneels upon the pitiless sands :
Too late he bends to the divine commands.

At length he steps into his boat, and soon
In the red west the fated shore
Grows ghostlier till 'tis seen no more.
Past him the waves unheeded flow :
He has no eye for clouds that glow :
He sees not setting sun nor rising moon :
Earth is a mist, and life is as a swoon.



SILENUS

THE STORY OF SILENUS

A DEMI-GOD, fat, indolent, and good-natured, skilled in music and dancing, usually riding on an ass, and often drinking from a wine-skin. He has the gift of prophecy, and when youths and maidens make him drunk with wine, and surround him with a circle of flowers, he is compelled to read the future to them.



SILENUS

I AM an old man, fat, and full of leisure :

Slowly I follow in the track of time.

My ass and I through sunshine creep,

And often stop to eat or sleep.

Seldom I care the rugged hills to climb :

The valley and the vineyards are my pleasure.

Old, bald, round-bellied, ruddy, rank of eye,

The jesting gods were pleased to fashion me.

Half god, half man, a medley strange,

Such as I am I never change.

By turns a fool and seer : now slave, now free :

Something of earth, and something of the sky.

Like the high gods I change not nor decay,

But over life and death I have no gift ;

Nor can I alter joy and pain,

Nor move a jot the sun and rain :

Only the future can I sometimes sift,

When my strong wine hath got me in its sway.

128 SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

Music is also mine, both flute and lyre :

Hermes my fingers taught, and Pan my lips ;

Yet in the dance best lives my fame,

And one new measure takes my name.

When my feet fly all nature with me trips,

And men leap to and fro like flames of fire.

But that is when my wine-bag hath been squeezed

Empty and flat, and head and belly meet.

Mostly upon my ass I sit,

And let him mumble with his bit.

He jogs a mile, or stops where grass is sweet :

So that my saddle shifts not I am pleased.

Sunshine I love, and wine, and flights of fun.

My ass I shake with laughter as I roll.

My sharp " he, he ! " and deep " ho, ho ! "

Wake wind and woods as past we go.

Ever some snatch of lusty song I troll,

While shouting youths and maidens with me run.

Sometimes the light-limbed damsels make a line,
And circle me about when I would pass ;
And then they pinch my neck and side,
And pluck at me till down I slide ;
Yea, and when I have tumbled from my ass,
They pull my beard, and ply me with strong wine.

“Father Silenus, sing to us!” they call.

“Here’s good ripe wine! Fill up thy cup again!”

And so they work me till I’ve drunk

My full, and, when in slumber sunk,

They run and pluck wild flowers, and weave a chain,

And I lie in the middle like a ball.

Anon they prick me from my dreams, and cry—

“Father Silenus, wake and tell us things!”

And sooth, beneath their flowery spell

My lips of hidden secrets tell.

Often, I wot, my drunken whisperings

Have wrought me trouble with the gods on high.

130 SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

I mind me when Apollo strove with Pan
In music, and King Midas judged their case,
I told what mischief would betide ;
Whereat Apollo bade me ride
An ass, that I might better rule my pace ;
And I laughed back, and said I liked the plan.

Once with my cursèd dreams I angered Jove,
By telling Semele what ill should hap
If to her bower the Great One came ;
And lo ! Jove flew to me in flame,
And warned me not to wear my prophet's cap
When he was busy with affairs of love.

Hera was wroth with me because I told
Young Bacchus of the storm-blight she had blown.
Never saw I so fierce a shrew
As through the flaming sky she flew !
Never was I so frightened by a frown !
But she was ever noted for a scold.

Truly, no prophet ever dreamed my dreams.

Venus and Mars I saw in Vulcan's cage,

Yet reckoned I the jest too dear

For any save my ass's ear.

Marsyas I cautioned of Apollo's rage,

And warned fair Mintha of the Stygian streams.

Also foretold I Erysichthon's pain.

Metis and Lara, boastful Niobe,

Paris the light, Leander bold,

Young Procris, and Tithonus old—

All these I timely warned of doom to be,

And yet to all my counsel was in vain.

These were like Autumn leaves that fall and sadden ;

But others were like Spring, all smiles and song.

Often I shake my drowsy ass

With laughter at some pleasant pass.

Oft, too, my wit hath made a right of wrong,

And many a heavy heart I've helped to gladden.

132 SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

The merriest quip that I can call to mind
 Happed when the young Corinna sought my aid,
 If she were destined to be won
 By Philo or by Telamon.

 With her fair Myrrha came, a bashful maid
Whose heart to Philo secretly inclined.

'Twas by the high gods ruled—they best know why—
 That mortals should have power my tongue to loose
 If they could make me drunk with wine,
 And round my sleeping body twine
 A chain of flowers. Once in that dainty noose,
I have to speak the truth, and cannot lie.

Mostly I mind not, so the wine be good,
 And the maids comely : pleasant, too, is sleep.
 Moreover, as the jades know well,
 Seldom can I resist their spell.
 Wine and soft fingers charm me till I creep
Into my dreams, on hidden things to brood.

But this time I was mindful of the snare,
And kept my wits. 'Twas a fine tangle, sooth !
Here were four lovers, two and two,
Yet would both youths one maiden woo.
Also one maid there was who loved one youth :
Another, with no choice betwixt the pair.

Philo and Telamon aye growled and glared,
Like two fierce dogs that long to be at grips.
Myrrha turned pale with jealousy
When Philo caught Corinna's eye.
Even Corinna used to bite her lips
When Myrrha glanced at Philo—so they fared.

At last they came to me, all four one mind
To cozen me their secret course to read.
With them blithe damsels sang and danced,
And to and fro like swallows glanced,
While laughing youths culled flowers from wood and
mead.

Truly, they thought to make me full and blind !

134 SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

I saw them coming through a distant wood,
And at the sight I laughed until I shook :
Then from my ass I lightly slipped,
And in a stream my wine-skin dipped.
'Twas sad to waste such liquor on a brook,
But I had plenty left as sweet and good.

Never did I so poor a thing before.
With water from the brook I filled my skin,
Then climbed upon my ass's back ;
And lo ! ere one a whip might crack,
They were all round me, buzzing to begin
Their impish tricks, and I but laughed the more.

Then the old game they all began to play,
Pricking and pinching, pulling here and there ;
While some spread garlands on the ground,
And circled me with blossoms round.
Some sang, some danced, some plucked my beard and
hair :
Some pressed my lips with wine to make me gay.

"Father Silenus," cried they, "taste our wine :

'Tis Chian, and far better than thy best !"

But though the smell seemed sweet enough,

I feigned a sickness for the stuff.

"Children," I said, "it savours of the pest !

Throw it away : 'tis only fit for swine !"

Then from my skin, as little as might be,

I drank, and made pretence to smack my lips

And suck my tongue. I wot I lied

So well they all were satisfied ;

And presently I rolled, and made some slips,

And talked and sang like one in drunken glee.

Loudly they laughed, and clapped their hands, and soon

They pulled at me till I fell off my ass ;

But as I rolled along the ground

Unseen my trusty knife I found,

And cut their garland level with the grass ;

And then I lay as still as 'twere a swoon.

136 SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

Nothing they guessed, but cried with eager look—

“Father Silenus, say how these shall mate?”

And I made feint with staring eyes

And gaping mouth to read the skies.

I told them how the gods had writ their fate,
And like green fish they swallowed my bare hook.

I told them Myrrha must with Philo wed,

And Telamon Corinna take for wife,

Else the high gods would work them ill

For trifling with the heavenly will ;

And then I gave three sighs, and came to life
Slowly, like one whose soul had some way fled.

The kindly damsels showed me every grace :

They gave me wine, and helped me to my feet ;

And then I begged them to unfold

The hidden secrets I had told.

Truly, my lie upon their lips lay sweet :

I listened with no laughter on my face.

“Children,” I said, “this is a serious thing :
Are ye agreed to what the gods command ?”
Then each, with finger laid on brow,
Said—“Jove be witness to our vow !”
Young Philo took his maiden by the hand,
And Telamon gave his a goodly ring.

Well pleased was I their strife was at an end ;
And presently I took my pipes, and said—
“Children, let's laugh and dance and sing,
And I will set a merry fling ;”
And soon across the green flew youth and maid.
I wot there was but little left to mend !

Long did they dance and sing, until the sky
Grew crimson with the setting of the sun.
The moon shed sheen on wood and hill,
Yet fresh as dawn they frolicked still ;
While from a withered stump I watched their fun,
And wondered if the truth could match my lie.

Anon, when through the woods they went their way,
And from their noise the world was free again,
I started at a strident sound
That seemed to labour from the ground,
A grumbling note, half laughter and half pain;
And suddenly my ass began to bray.



CEPHALUS AND PROCRIS

THE STORY OF CEPHALUS AND PROCRIS

CEPHALUS, a beautiful youth, is married to Procris, whom he devotedly loves. Eos, the goddess of dawn, falls in love with him, and, when he rejects her advances, tells him that it would be easy to tempt Procris to desert him. He accepts the challenge, and, being changed by the goddess into a stranger, wins the love of Procris; whereupon he discovers himself, and Procris flies in shame from his reproaches. The goddess Artemis (Diana) meets her as she wanders in despair, gives her a spear and a hound of unequalled aim and speed, and sends her back to Cephalus disguised as a strange maiden. In her turn she wins the love of Cephalus, and, discovering herself, their quarrel is made up. Procris, however, is still jealous of Eos, and follows Cephalus as he is hunting with the spear and hound of Artemis. Seeing a movement in the bushes, and thinking it is a wild animal, Cephalus hurls the magic spear and strikes Procris, who is watching him from the shelter of some trees.



CEPHALUS AND PROCRIS

CLOUD upon cloud, rolls back the yielding night :
A faint light fills the eastern sky :
Westward its fading shadows fly.
In rosy triumph smiles the morn,
While laughter shakes each herald horn.
The waking worlds are gladdened with the sight,
And songs of glory hail the risen light.

Rose-veiled, upon the topmost eastern hill
Stands the fair Spirit of the Dawn.
Beneath her Earth lies like a lawn,
With mountain, lake, and river mist
Soft-tinted as an amethyst.
Earthward she leans that her pale beams may fill
The valleys that in darkness slumber still.

Now dips she down, and all the level floods
With her soft light : the dewy green
Of meadow flashes back her sheen :
The river, rushing on its way,
Stops with her silver shield to play :
No more the mystic forest silent broods,
But song and laughter stir the waking woods.

Soon, when the Sun-god drives his glittering team,
And melts the mist from cliff and cape,
The goddess dons her maiden shape.
Half hides she in a cloud that dims
Her comely face and rosy limbs.
Her beauty is the beauty of a dream,
Pale with imaginings that far-off gleam.

Gentle is she, and easy of her charms.

Softly she sheds on Earth and skies

The love-light lingering in her eyes.

It burns not like the Sun-god's rays,

But pale as glancing moonlight plays.

Her passion is like ocean in its calms :

Forgetful love lies longing in her arms.

Beneath her, straying in a woodland glade,

She sees a youth who stirs her heart.

His right hand holds a hunter's dart,

While his left grips a light-linked chain

Which three strong greyhounds fiercely strain.

Of spotted leopard-skin his dress is made,

And in his girdle gleams a two-edged blade.

Softly she floats to Earth, and near him stands,
Greeting him with a gentle smile
Whose sweetness might a god beguile.
He looks at her, and with her glance
Half falls into a dream-like trance.
He trembles when she lifts her rosy hands :
Something of awe her gentleness commands.

Her voice is like the music of a grove
When waking birds break into song
After a night that's lingered long.
"Fair youth," she says, "be free of fear :
Oft have I watched thee wandering here
While my pale chariot climbed the clouds above,
And now I come to tell thee of my love.

“Trouble no more to track thy toilsome game
Through thirsty glade and tangled dell.
Come, and with me divinely dwell
In cloudy calm, where misty dreams
Make music sweet as distant streams.
There shalt thou linger, lapped by love’s pale flame,
Lost in the sleep that frets not after fame.”

Wondering he listens, and his lips would fain
Find a meet answer ; yet once more
She speaks, and softly as before.
“O youth,” she says, “a bitter brine
Spoils the best draught of Earthly wine ;
But come with me, and thou shalt sweetly drain
The gods’ own joy that mingles not with pain.”

At length he speaks to her—"I pray thee tell,
O wondrous form before thou fade,
If goddess thou or Earthly maid?"
She smiling says—"Divine am I,
The ruler of the waking sky,
Whose pearly clouds beneath my finger's spell
Turn to the pale pink of the asphodel.

"Each morning over yonder snow-capped hill
I mount, yet but a little while
Is the sky lighted by my smile.
Then in my wave-washed bower below,
Where the great girdling waters flow,
I slumber, and my dreams are pleasant still.
Come with me there, and joy thy heart shall fill."

Then Cephalus awakes from sleep to cry—

“O goddess, deem it not disdain

Of thy fair offer that 'tis vain,

But I am wedded to a wife

Dearer than all the dreams of life ;

And lo ! the Earth is ours, and thine the Sky :

The gods made man to live, and then to die.”

The goddess laughs, and says—“O silly youth,

Who mocks at joy to-day, to-morrow

May look to find a twofold sorrow !

Dream not false dreams, nor be too sure

That thy heart's love is fond or pure.

Dar'st thou to try her faith ? If so in sooth,

I'll teach thy blindness how to test the truth.”

No longer bends he to her blandishment :

A hot flush burns his angry brow.

“Hear me,” he cries, “and write my vow

In flame upon thy clouds above—

My life I venture for my love !

Yea, let all lies upon her truth be spent,

I'll warrant that her soul is innocent !”

The goddess laughs again : then in his hand

Places two phials. “Drink of this,”

She says, “and thy true love shall miss

Thy presence in a form that's strange :

Woo her, nor wonder if she change ;

And when thou wouldst thy wonted shape command,

This other drink : then tell her why 'twas planned.”

Then slowly fades the goddess from his sight,

Melting into the misty steam

Breathed by the Sun-god's smoking team ;

While Cephalus, with wondering eyes,

Sees but a cloudless blue of skies.

Vainly he seeks to follow in her flight,

Bewildered by the veil of blinding light.

'Twere all a dream save for her parting gift,

The mystic philtre that will prove

The faith or falseness of his love.

He doubts not her he holds so dear,

Yet longs for light her truth to clear.

He swears she's sound, and yet the veil would lift

To prove that her perfection has no rift.

At length the dainty drops he fain would dare

To drink—each drop a jewelled beam

Of light : then seeks a crystal stream ;

And lo ! from out the mirrored brook

He sees a strange face upward look.

It moves with his, it gives back stare for stare :

He strokes his brow, and finds a strange hand there.

The goddess has not wanted in her art :

The form that in the stream is shown

Glow with a grace that dims his own.

Already quivers in his eye

The storm-light of love's jealousy.

He halts no more, but plans to play his part,

Resolved to try his wife, and prove her heart.

Meanwhile fair Procris waits him in her bower,
Impatient of the lingering morn ;
And when at length she hears his horn,
Gladly she runs to show him grace,
Then starts to see a stranger's face ;
A face that has the beauty of a flower
Fresh with the fragrance of an April shower.

She looks at him with wonder in her eyes,
Then shyly asks if he by chance
Has met her lord ? With meaning glance
He answers—"Yonder in a glade
I saw a hunter with a maid,
One that a goddess looked in mortal guise,
Yet seemed she not thy husband to despise."

Now flushes she, and cries with jealous fire—

“I wot he had no cause for this!”

The stranger answers—“Had his bliss

Been mine, no jot my heart had given

Of Earthly joy for all in Heaven!”

She sighs, and says—“Alas! men quickly tire!

’Twas but last night I was his soul’s desire!”

He nearer draws to her, and takes her hand.

“Judge not all men by one,” he says.

“He that loves truly never strays.

As lightly might the earth and sea

Change places as love move from thee.

Love that is love is not a shifting sand,

But a firm rock that doth the waves withstand.”

She blushes, and draws back, as though afraid ;

And then, remembering he's her guest,

Leads him within her bower to rest.

Long lingers he : noon yields to night,

The moon sheds down her sheen of light,

Making a fairy day of glen and glade ;

Yet still he loiters with the lonely maid.

Something there is in him that strangely moves

Her yielding soul to love's sweet bond.

Insensibly her heart grows fond.

The music of his presence seems

Familiar as remembered dreams.

Strewn with old flowers, through a new path she roves :

Almost before she notes the change, she loves.

Her faith was strong, but now that it is shaken
Wild doubts begin to move her mind
If wisdom waits on wave or wind.
Youth lays on her its witching spell,
And this new lover woos her well.
Her love is in its Summer, and must slaken
In some fresh stream the thirst that is forsaken.

And so she yields—her heart, her hand, her kisses.
Upon his beating warmth of breast
Her golden head finds gentle rest ;
And while she dreams with half-closed eye,
The second phial drains he dry.
Soon she looks up and smiles, then something misses—
Fled like a fitful flame are all her blisses !

Gone is the stranger's smile, and in its place

She sees her husband's angry brow,

No love-light lingering on it now.

"False one," he cries, "and blind to blame,

Let thy heart witness to thy shame !

Well spake the goddess, when I scorned her grace,

That thou wouldst lightly look on any face !"

She can but hang her head, although her heart

Pleads that the fault is half his own.

When she looks up she is alone ;

And quickly comes a maddening fear,

A sense of shame to linger here.

Better from all that once was dear to part,

Than stay to bear the poison of his dart.

She flies into the forest, fast and far,
Like a scared doe—she heeds not where,
So that it leads her from her care.
Through gloomy glens and tangled brakes
Her weary way she blindly takes.
Night falls, she fears it not : star follows star :
Pale Artemis breathes comfort from her car.

Pale Artemis, the hope of maids forlorn.
With lifted hands the golden rays
Procris for heavenly guidance prays ;
And lo ! ere she can bend her knees,
Trembling, a wondrous shape she sees :
A wondrous shape, which shining stars adorn,
Steps from the silver margin of the horn.

And then, like music from a far-off strand,
A voice—"I bring thee rest from storm.
I give to thee another form,
So that thy lord ensnared may be
In the same net he set for thee.
Woo him; and when I see thy lifted hand,
Thy wonted shape shall come at my command.

"Take, too, this spear which errs not in its aim,
And this sure hound unmatched in speed;
But of their guiding have good heed:
Be not too jealous in thy joy:
Misused, the gifts of gods destroy."
She smiles, then vanishes in silver flame,
Companioned by the stars that sing her fame.

Then gladdened Procris goes her grateful way,
The trusty hound her homeward guide,
Sure as a stream that seeks its tide.
At break of dawn, still sleeping late,
She looks on her offended mate.

She looks, and longs her new-learned part to play,
Yet loiters till the crimson crowns the gray.

At length, while bending low to look on him,
A slender bough beneath her breaks,
And with a heavy sigh he wakes;
But soon he springs upon his feet,
In wonder at the vision sweet.

He rubs his eyes, lest dreams have made them dim,
Doubting such loveliness of face and limb.

He waits not on the music of his wooing,
But like a new-robed proselyte,
Late-travelled out of misty night,
Lays all his worship at her shrine,
And revels in her light divine ;
And she, well-pleased with what her love is doing,
Flies not too far before his hot pursuing.

And lo ! when she has bent to his desire,
When the rich treasure of her charms
Lies open to his longing arms,
When his lips tell the tale once more
That he has never loved before,
And that his joy in her can never tire—
Then looks she up, and sees the moon's pale fire.

Pale Artemis still lingers in the sky.

Procris, remembering her command,

Lifts to her light a trembling hand :

Then feels a sudden shock of change,

That thrills her through with motion strange.

She starts, and Cephalus with wondering eye

Sees his lost wife, and greets her with a cry.

Now are they equal in their guilt and shame,

Like thieves that play on one another

Till each is found out by the other.

When Cephalus his fault would prove

By some strange prompting of her love,

Procris but laughs, and says she felt the same ;

So they agree to kiss and share the blame.

Once more their love in rosy sunlight glows ;
But mortal joy is bright and brief
As the red glory of the leaf :
A little wind, a little rain,
And the worn woods are dull again ;
And Nature heeds not when a blossom blows :
She has no time to count the seed she sows.

Great joy finds Cephalus in Dian's spear
And hound, which never miss their mark.
Eager he hunts from dawn to dark ;
Yet often wonders that each day
Of late has risen cold and gray.
Almost he trembles with a nameless fear
When the pale dawn can scarce the darkness clear.

One morning, ghostly in the glimmering light,
He sees the goddess floating down.
The gifts of Dian move her frown ;
But soon she laughs, and says—" I wis
I need no help from Artemis ;
Yet am I minded, for her own despite,
To borrow from the scornful Queen of Night."

She says no more, but fades into the day ;
And Cephalus, with brooding eye,
Wonders what in her words may lie.
Next morn, before the sky is red,
A lambent flame of mystic dread
On Procris falls : she shudders as each ray
Entangles all her dreams in maddening play.

She hears a voice that whispers in her ear—

“Go, watch thy husband, foolish maid,
Where, in yon oak-embowered glade,
He meets the goddess of the Dawn,
Nor troubles for the flying fawn.”

She wakes, but still is shadowed by her fear :
All day the warning follows close and clear.

Each dawn she hears the voice, and still the flame
Burns her, until her heart at last
With jealousy beats thick and fast.
No longer can she bear her doubt,
But is resolved to sift it out.

Her lord she follows, as he hunts his game,
Through wood and wild till she is spent and lame.

At length she sees an antlered quarry start
From a thick covert, while the hound
Strains till its belly frays the ground.
She stoops to hide, but with a thorn
Her tender foot is sharply torn.
She starts and cries, and lo! the deadly dart
Of Dian flies, and quivers in her heart.

Then Cephalus, in frenzy for his deed,
Runs and kneels by her, and the skies
Echo the anguish of his cries.
Frantic he calls on Earth and Heaven
To heal the wound his hand has given;
But all in vain: her soul is past his heed:
She can but sigh—"I love thee!" and then speed.

Now is he all too numbed with hopeless grief
For speech or tears: he only flings
His heavy heart on her, and clings
Sore-wounded to that silent shrine,
Sealing his sorrow like strong wine.
He cannot weep, though 'twere his life's relief,
The bitter life he pleads with to be brief.

He knows not when he leaves her, when his pain
First learns to walk, or eat, or sleep:
Its dead the dead past seems to keep.
Only the beating pulse of sorrow
Marks his to-day from his to-morrow.
A dull sense troubles him that life is vain:
That the gods only give to take again.

For many days he wanders through the wood,
Careless of all that once was dear.
His hound he slaughters with his spear ;
And that dread gift which spoiled his dream
He flings into a passing stream.
Scarcely he lives, so scanty is his food :
Only upon his loss he loves to brood.

One morn he lifts his heavy eyes to see
The pale-browed goddess standing dim
In all her grace of rosy limb.
One star burns in her breeze-blown hair,
Drying the dew that sparkles there.
Round her, half clinging and half floating free,
Soft clouds take shape from her divinity.

Closer she comes, and smiles on his despair.

“O youth,” she says, “why waste thy tears

Thus idly on the withered ears,

When the field laughs with golden grain

Whose glory ripens not in vain?

Although thy gathered blossom seemed so rare,

Still in Life’s garden are there blooms as fair.”

And Cephalus but answers with a moan—

“Sweeter are withered leaves to love

Than brightest blooms that scent the grove.”

“Yea,” she replies, “but mortal doom

Too soon will lay thee with thy bloom.

Why spend thy time in sadness and alone?

Why not let love and joy for grief atone?

“Life’s golden wine lies in a shallow measure,

Which the high gods are loath to fill.

Drain, then, the cup, and nothing spill.

Drink of its sweetness while thou may,

Nor cast one sparkling drop away.

Small is the gift, and little is the leisure :

Short is man’s day, and shorter still his pleasure.”

He only sighs, and she is once more bold.

“O youth,” she says, “when first I came,

Thy constancy I could not blame ;

But ’tis not well new sweets to waste

Because the old thou canst not taste.

Let not the dish I offer thee grow cold

While thou dost starve with sighing for the old.

“She whom thou mournest will not dry a tear
Because thou spendest all to weep,
Nor can thy dreams make bright her sleep.
Think not thy joy will bring her sadness,
Nor that thy grief will give her gladness.
Come with me, then, and climb my cloudy sphere,
Or slumber where my stream flows cool and clear.

“Come, and I’ll give thee joy beyond Earth’s dream—
Yea, thy lost silver shall be gold
When my fond arms around thee fold.
Mortals but see the shell of love :
Its pearl is with the gods above.
Come, and thy car shall be my brightest beam,
And all my whitest stars thy willing team.”

She stoops, and with the pale rose of her hand
Touches him lightly on the brow,
And all his trembling frame's aglow.
Lower she bends, and with her kiss
His blood leaps to an unknown bliss.
Before her breath his will is like the sand :
He feels that he must yield to her command.

He sighs with dreamy joy while her soft fire
Runs through his veins ; and soon her arm
Circles him round : a blessed calm
Of sweet content, like dreamless sleep,
Steals o'er him as they slowly sweep
Upward and onward, higher and still higher,
Until the Earth fades like a lost desire.

HYLAS

THE STORY OF HYLAS

A BEAUTIFUL youth, and the chosen friend of Hercules, whom he joins in the expedition of the Argonauts. On the coast of Mysia Hylas lands to draw water from a fountain. The Naiads who dwell there fall in love with his beauty, and drag him down into the water, and he is seen no more. His friend, Hercules, vainly searches for him everywhere, and, shouting his name into the well, thinks that he hears a faint reply from Hylas.



HYLAS

BRIGHT is the day, and blue are sea and sky :

A gentle breeze stirs perfume from the flowers :
The laden bees make music as they fly :
The birds are singing in a hundred bowers.

A little river, running to the shore,
Laughs in the sunlight, and returns its kisses.
'Tis like a lover that comes back no more,
Loitering and lingering with its half-won blisses.

Lightly it laps the smiling meadow-land :
The blossoms bend to it, and breathe farewell ;
And then it hurries down the shallow sand
To ocean, and the sea's forgetful spell.

Its birth-place is a hollow of the hills

Where the cleft rock a crystal fountain yields,
Whose stream the fissured depth below it fills
Before its waste flows downward to the fields.

Deep is the pool, and of a wondrous blue,

And cool with clustering fern and clinging moss.
From its green marge spring flowers of brightest hue,
Moist with the spray its sparkling waters toss.

Here Naiads dwell, and often at warm noon

Their fairy frolic stirs the shadows cool,
But oftener when the love-light of the moon
Lingers above the ripples of the pool.

Mostly, when mortals break upon their play,

With elfin laughter fly they like a dream ;
Yet sometimes comely youths they tempt to stray,
Lured by their beauty mirrored in the stream.

Him whom they fancy with soft arms they fold,
 Kissing, and leading to the reedy shore :
Then, laughing, plunge into the waters cold,
 And lo ! the love-lost youth is seen no more.

Up the steep track that seeks the hills above
 Earth's fairest youth springs lightly as a fawn,
Singing blithe songs in worship of his love,
 Or laughing with the laughter of the dawn.

Like to the god of sunshine and of song
 His shapely limbs, where strength contends with grace.
The amorous winds, that for his beauty long,
 Blow back his locks that they may kiss his face.

A water-skin across his back is slung,
 For he has come to steal the fountain's treasure.
He hurries not : the day is fair and young,
 And the warm air is full of perfumed pleasure.

176 SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

Stream, flowers, and birds are all a careless joy :

 The very clouds seem painted on the sky.

His heart beats like the pulses of a boy,

 That flutter with the kite he seeks to fly.

He flings a stone that stirs the river sheen,

 And laughs to watch the tiny storm of spray.

It sinks, and not a ruffle now is seen.

 He sighs, he knows not why, and goes his way.

Ere long he stands before the sparkling spring,

 Beneath the purple shadow of the mountain.

He stoops, and leans beyond the reedy ring

 To fill his thirsty measure from the fountain.

He stoops, then backward starts in wondering fear,

 As laughter, like the breezy stir of rushes,

Ripples around him, now far off, now near,

 Faint as the flickering dawn when first it flushes.

He looks and listens, looks in wonder round,
Then sees a group of maidens, lily-fair ;
Some in the water, some upon the ground,
Starlike, and cloudless save their shining hair.

Some through the lily-leaves their faces show,
Hiding and peeping like a half-shut flower :
Some lift their arms above the crystal flow,
To pelt their sisters with a fairy shower.

Some on a rocky ledge high up are resting :
Some in the rushes hide their shapely limbs :
Some the swift stream that runs below are breasting,
And scarce the mirrored blue their beauty dims.

And over all their laughter, like the song
Of birds at sunrise, ripples in a stream
Of music that may half to Earth belong,
Half to the whispered sweetness of a dream.

178 SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

Hylas still gazes, wondering if he sips
 A draught of Earth, or fares on Heavenly wine ;
And still he listens while their rosy lips
 Breathe laughter which he dreams to be divine.

Their beauty is the beauty of the skies
 At dawn-glow—yet to come the promised fire.
The moonlight passion sleeping in their eyes
 More than the sun's fulfilment moves desire.

Hylas still dreams of beauty from above.
 He knows not if to tremble or rejoice :
Too full of worship are his thoughts for love ;
 And while he looks and listens comes a voice.

'Tis music which a Heavenly nymph might sing
 In her blue sky ; or, being an Earthly tune,
Such as the sweetest Nightingale in Spring
 Might plead with in its warblings to the moon.

He thinks the voice is from the sweetest singer,

And that the singer is the fairest there.

“O youth,” she says, “thou hast been cold to linger
So long, while we have waited in despair.

“The sun hath melted many times the frost,

And Spring hath often sung, and Summer smiled,

While we have waited, fearing thou wert lost ;

But now thy presence hath our grief beguiled.”

Another voice he hears, that falls as sweetly—

“O youth, it hath been weariness to wait ;

But thy long absence makes us glad to greet thee :

Swift-footed is the joy that cometh late.”

One says—“O youth, love sleepeth in our arms :”

Another—“Red our lips, and ripe our kisses :”

A third—“The Spring doth blossom in our charms :”

A fourth—“As full as Summer fruit our blisses.”

Then Hylas looks and lingers, looks and longs.

“O maidens,” says he, “lovelier than the light
Of sun or stars—dreamed dimly in our songs—
How could I see you and forget the sight?”

Once more he hears the ripple of their mirth.

“O youth,” they say, “long since we vowed a vow
That only to the fairest youth on Earth
Our love should yield, and we behold him now.

“O youth, if it contenteth thee to stay,
All that we have—love, beauty, joy divine,
Pleasures that make a lifetime of a day—
Yea, more than mortals dream of—shall be thine.

“Stay, and we’ll teach thee how to rule these waves,
So that their secrets to thy spell may yield.
This fountain and this stream shall be thy slaves.
Our sceptre shall be thine to hold and wield.

“And thou shalt look upon our crystal strand,
Our fairy palace in the blue below,
Whose pearly floor is strewn with silver sand,
Whose golden walls with starry jewels glow.

“Stay with us, youth, and thou shalt learn delight,
Lapped in the soft enchantment of our arms.
Thy day shall be all sunshine, and thy night
All moonglow, all a sleep of dreamless calms.”

Hylas still looks and longs, and then a fear
Stirs him—he backward starts—once more a sound
Of elfin laughter ripples in his ear—
Fast in two fairy arms the youth is bound.

Now crowd they round him, laughing as they run :
White arms enfold him, and red lips give kisses.
A moth might break the web a spider spun,
But he can never fly these fearsome blisses.

One hangs upon his neck : about his waist
Another clings : some clip his arms and feet,
And laughing, kissing, drag him with sure haste
Nearer the fountain, whispering love-words sweet.

Now is he theirs to dally with or drown.
Those on the bank his yielding body push :
Those in the water help to draw him down :
Half-dazed, he falls into the fountain's flush.

If it be death, 'tis coloured like the dawn !
If life be tangled, dainty is the net !
Downward with his their shapely forms are drawn.
Never was finest jewel fairer set !

The echo of their laughter stirs the air :
A little ripple breaks against the shore :
The birds make music still, and still are fair
The Earth and sky ; but he is seen no more.

Earth's hero, seeking for his vanished friend,
Waking with shouts the sleeping hills and plain,
Hears a faint answer from the fount ascend :
Then seaward turns, knowing that help is vain.



IPHIGENIA

THE STORY OF IPHIGENIA

THE daughter of Agamemnon, the leader of the Greeks against Troy. A great calm delays the Grecian fleet, and when the Seer Calchas is consulted he declares that the wrath of Artemis (Diana) has been provoked because Agamemnon had slain a stag in her sacred grove, and that only the sacrifice of Iphigenia will appease the goddess. Agamemnon yields to the will of the gods, despite the angry protest of the queen, Clytemnestra, and Iphigenia is bound to the altar; but as the priest is about to slay her the maiden appeals to Artemis, who carries her off in a cloud, and leaves in her place a white hart. Then a fair wind blows, and the Grecian fleet sails.



IPHIGENIA

THE Grecian fleet is sleeping in the bay :

Beneath the breathless blue of sky,

Glued to the sea, the vessels lie :

The blistered sails no motion show,

Nor stir they in the glass below.

There is no change : alike are night and day,

Save where the blue burns slowly into gray.

Unholy is the calm, as though the ire

Of the high gods that rule in Heaven

On the offending Earth had fallen.

In vain men pray, and priests invoke :

In vain ascends the straight-winged smoke :

The gods are deaf and blind, or else they tire

Of bending to the Earth at man's desire.

Listless, men lie upon the motionless deck,
Or follow where the panting flock
Seeks shade beneath some sheltering rock.
The water looks like molten lead,
Late-cooled, which almost men might tread.
On all its burnished face there is no fleck :
'Tis like a polished mirror free of speck.

Fixed are the ships like rocks upon the sea,
No passing strangers, but a part,
Dark dots upon a coloured chart.
The water banded round their sides
Is like the mark of many tides.
It is so long since they have bounded free,
Lost seems the very sense of liberty.

Half up the burning beach an altar stands,
 Heaped high with stones, and piled with wood,
 Flameless as yet, and free of blood.
Beside it priests and warriors wait,
 Silent, like men who watch for fate.
Chief in their midst, an old man spreads his hands
Skyward, as if to seek the gods' commands.

Stern is his look, as of a world defied.
 His eye half glows with frenzy's gleam,
 Half slumbers in a mystic dream.
Now stands he still and mute as death :
 Now mutters spells beneath his breath.
Now is he fixed on Heaven : now turns aside,
Earth-drawn, like one still conscious in his pride.

At length the chosen chief, Mycenæ's lord,
Ventures with halting haste on speech.
"Calchas," he says, "whose counsels teach
The wisest, thou who readest best
The secrets hid from mortal breast,
Canst thou unfold the gods' unspoken word,
And why their wrath thus blunts the Grecian sword?"

Then the Seer slowly turns, and says—"O King,
The answer from the gods is plain:
Thou art the cause of all our pain,
Because thou slayedst with thy dart
In Dian's grove a sacred hart;
Wherefore the angered goddess swore to bring
On thee and all our race sore suffering.

“And lo, her stream of wrath hath hardly yet
Begun to flow, and but one way
Is shown her lifted hand to stay ;
Yet be thou warned, O King, the road
Is rough, and heavy is the load.
Hard is the task the angered gods have set,
And little will they lighten of the debt.”

Then Agamemnon speaks with darkened brow—
“Wisdom and truth, O Seer, are thine,
But my soul’s constancy is mine.
Tell me what gift the gods demand :
’Tis theirs if it be life or land,
Children or wife—yea, all will I bestow,
And Jove himself be witness to my vow !”

A shudder runs through all the listening throng :

Even Calchas bends his head in ruth.

“O King,” he says, “in very truth

Great are thy words, yet hard to prove,

For man is measured by his love,

And few there be of mortal mould so strong

As might endure the mending of this wrong.”

The King but answers—“Say what hath to be?”

Then Calchas points with trembling hands

To where the Chief's fair daughter stands.

“Behold,” he says, “the choice of Heaven,

Whose life must to the gods be given

Ere yonder ships that simmer in the sea

Wake from their sleep and once more wander free!”

Deep silence falls, and then a murmurous moan
Of awe. Alone of all the crowd
The King stands steadfast and unbowed.
“What the gods choose the gods must take,”
He says; “yet would I for her sake—
Yea, and for mine—that I might now atone
For what was my offence, and mine alone.”

Then from the distance comes a sudden cry—
Half rage, half fear—and soon is seen,
Threading the press, the frenzied Queen.
On the doomed maid her hand she lays,
While to her lord she scornful says—
“Hath the heat caused thee to believe the lie
This fool pretends was whispered from the sky?

“Hast thou no pity in thy blood? no shame?

Art thou all ice? Men call thee wise,

And read their counsel in thine eyes;

And yet because a common knave

Of the high gods is pleased to rave,

Thou wouldst give up thy daughter to the flame,

While all the world looks on with silent blame!

“O lord, be warned while warning is not vain!

Since thou didst choose me for thy wife

No breath hath blurred my mirrored life,

Nor ever shall; but take thou heed:—

Lift thy least hand to this foul deed,

And never look to me for love again,

And let this Seer foretell the joy or pain!”

A gentle answer draws she from the King.

“Thou dost not,” says he, “understand

That one must die to save the land.”

Then the maid calls he to his side,

And says—“O loved, do thou decide.

Thou, who art dear to me as flowers to Spring,

Lo, thou shalt have the ruling of this thing.”

Slowly the trembling maiden from his breast

Lifts her fair head, and says—“O Sire,

What thou and the high gods desire

I choose. Though life is sweet to me,

I only yield thy gift to thee.

I wot thou lov'st me ; and thou knowest best,

And the gods know—obeyed be their behest.”

Now by the altar, in white robe arrayed,
The victim kneels : her tender hands
Are tightly bound with leathern bands :
Already gleams the lifted knife
That is to take her trembling life ;
But ere it falls, with Heaven-bent eyes, the maid
Calls on the angered goddess for her aid.

“ O fairest star,” she cries, “ that shines above,
Yet not too far for mortal pain
To seek thy help, nor seek in vain,
My life is thine to take or spare—
My life, that longs but for thy care !
Lo, I have worshipped thee in sky or grove
Since I could lift my hands to thee in love !

“O star-crowned Artemis! O purest light
That burns in heaven! Whose rays divine
Ever on hapless maidens shine!
Thou who dost sail the flame-fringed sky
Cloudless in thy virginity!—

Stoop from thy silver car that climbs the night,
And let my grief be gladdened with thy sight!

“O maiden Queen! Star of virginity!
If for some good 'tis thy desire
That I should perish in this fire,
Help thou my trembling youth to bend
Submissive to thy sovereign end;
But if thy wisdom wills me not to die,
Show the fair flame of thy divinity!”

Even while she speaks thick darkness shrouds the air,
And in the midst with wondering fear
Men see the full moon shining clear.
Then, while they gaze, once more 'tis day :
The dreadful darkness fades away ;
And lo ! the maiden is no longer there,
But in her place a hart with snow-white hair.

Now through the cloudy sky the smoke no more
Climbs its steep course, but, wandering free,
Is blown across the windy sea :
The eager ships their anchors drag :
Full-bellied is each sail : each flag
Flings its fair length : their weary waiting o'er,
Warriors and sailors hurry down the shore.

Soon through the white-topped waves the vessels run :
The Grecian coast is fading fast,
And looms the Trojan land at last—
The Trojan land so dark with doom,
Ghostly amid the deepening gloom—
The Trojan land that in the blood-red sun
Gleams with the light of battles not begun.



THE DEATH OF PARIS

THE STORY OF THE DEATH OF PARIS

ŒNONE, the daughter of the river-god Cebren, and the faithful wife of Paris, the son of Priam King of Troy, is deserted by her husband. The latter has carried off Helen, the beautiful wife of Menelaus King of Lacedæmon, so causing the Greek expedition against Troy. Paris, being wounded by a poisoned arrow, is advised by Helen to seek help from his deserted wife, who is skilful in healing wounds. Œnone, indignant at his treatment of her, refuses to save him, but after his death is so touched with remorse that she takes poison to end her grief.



THE DEATH OF PARIS

FAR down Mount Ida flows a gentle stream,
Whose winding waters wander to the plain ;
The clear, cool waters where the lilies gleam,
And fairies hide till moonlight falls again.

The Naiad-haunted stream where Cebren reigns,
The river-god, whose fair-limbed daughter fled,
Leaving her passionless peace for love's sweet pains,
The short-lived love which blossomed and is dead.

From her cool water-weeds she careless strayed
One sunny noon, wooed by the witching air
Which Paris, wandering in the woodland, played—
Paris the Shepherd-Prince, the false and fair.

SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

She listened and she lingered till her love
Was all his own, to wanton with and waste.
Then fled she with him to the woods above,
Love's sweetness and love's bitterness to taste.

He loved her and he left her, like a wind
That for a moment with a blossom plays.
She loved him with her heart and with her mind,
Not for an idle hour, but for all days.

Now wets she all the woodland with her tears,
While Paris wantons with his new-found bride,
Careless while Greek and Trojan break their spears,
Content if he may dally by her side.

Yet is a shadow gathering to his sun.
He wants not for the courage of his race,
And sometimes joins the strife his fault begun,
Nor in the fighting fears a foremost place.

By chance a cunning Archer—he whose craft
 Handles the poisoned darts Heracles gave—
Sees Paris, and sore wounds him with a shaft
 Whose deadly sting no mortal strength can brave.

Some say the shaft was aimed by Hera's spite,
 And that Athena winged it through the air ;
While Aphrodite followed in its flight,
 Too late to fend the favoured of her care.

Soon the wound frets, and Paris sickens sore :
 His limbs grow stiff, and harder comes his breath.
In love and battle he contends no more :
 Darker the shadow falls of waiting death.

Then Helen says to him—"Nought gives thee ease ;
 And thou hast often spoken of thy wife,
How great her skill in healing of disease.
 Why not return to her, and beg thy life ?

“Thou needest but to give her gentle speech,
Or feign her love till thou art rid thy pain,
And I will follow within easy reach.
Once thou art healed we can come here again.”

Then Paris softly sighs, and half regrets,
While his wound troubles him, his vanished dream.
Peace smiles on him beyond the pain that frets:
Sweet are Ænone's woods and cooling stream.

Ænone's, yet no more Ænone's now.
She cannot bear her lonely upland woods,
That ever whisper of love's broken vow.
Now by her father's stream she sits and broods.

She sits and wonders why she is forsaken,
Watching the waves that past the pebbles flow,
The little waves that with their whispers waken
The sleeping lilies which the breezes blow.

A bird is singing in a tree above :

She has no joy to spend upon the Spring.

It seems to her to prattle of its love :

She has no love, and therefore cannot sing.

She sighs, and weeps again, then turns to go,

And then her heavy heart is stirred to beat.

She sees a grisly figure, gaunt with woe,

That flings itself, half fainting, at her feet.

It lifts its trembling hands to her, and moans—

“Help, or I die !” ’Tis Paris, yet the ghost

Of Paris, all his laughter turned to groans,

A Spring-bloom shrivelled by untimely frost.

And at the sight of him C  none’s tears

Fall as dew falls upon the withered ground.

Lost is her wrong in pity and in fears :

She can but kneel, and weep above his wound.

“O love,” she cries, “thou hast been absent long,
And thou hadst never cause to change and fly;
But ’tis no time to think upon the wrong,
And thou art still too dear to let thee die!”

Quickly she runs, and gathers from the stream
Some healing herbs, and on his burning sore
Spreads them, and lo! his anguish like a dream
Softly takes wing, fear flies, sleep comes once more.

So tends she him, and laughs with gentle joy
To see life win, and watch death backward driven.
Once more he is her Prince, the fair-faced boy
Who wooed her, and his fault is half forgiven.

Soon the wound mends beneath her practised zeal,
And Paris finds his vanished mirth again.
“O blessed nurse!” he cries. “What skill to heal!
Already am I eased of half my pain!”

But ever Paris has a faulty string,
 Ever his bow is broken in the bending.
No sooner can he use his wounded wing
 Than he would fly the hand that wrought its mending.

Even while he thanks her she can see his eye
 Glance to an olive-grove that rustles near,
And well she knows his longing look and sigh
 Are not for her, but one he holds more dear.

She follows with her own the glance he turns,
 And soon her jealous eye his treason sees.
Soon her pale face with angry crimson burns :
 Her hated rival hides among the trees.

Now all her pity dies within her heart :
 The healing herbs she snatches from his wound ;
And soon he feels again the deadly smart :
 He gasps for breath, and sinks upon the ground.

210 SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

And then she cries, her gentle face all flame—

“O false and fool, too hasty is thy craft!

Only a careless hunter follows game

Before his spear is mended in the haft!”

And Paris murmurs—“Pardon me, O Sweet!

Thou only dwellest in my heart and mind;

And I have laid my trouble at thy feet,

Remembering that thy heart was ever kind.”

But no fond pity stirs CEnone now.

The twilight gentleness has left her face,

And scornful anger broods upon her brow:

Love's flickering flame burns out its lingering grace.

Coldly she looks at him, and coldly says—

“We both remember—thou that I was true,

And I that thou wert false in all thy ways,

Pleased with the old when there was nothing new.

“Thou dost remember that I once was fond,
 And I forget not one of all thy lies.
 Tell me what’s hidden in those trees beyond,
 And speak thou truth, as fitteth one that dies?”

“Hast thou not still some evil to confess?
 Are not thy dying dreams yet hot with harm?
 Lo, the trees rustle with a woman’s dress!
 The sunlight flashes on a woman’s arm!”

And Paris moans—“’Tis only the wind’s strife;”
 But she, with mocking laugh and clapping hands,
 Cries—“O thou fair one, all the world’s fond wife,
 Come, and give help to catch these falling sands!”

Then, pale and proud, steps slowly from the wood
 The loveliest form that ever challenged light;
 She who all Greece and Ilium bathed in blood,
 And cast a shadow darker than the night.

Her brow frowns hate, her lips smile trembling love :
For pity of his plight she feigns compliance ;
Yet the hawk's jesses hardly fit the dove,
Her silken hood scarce hides her scorn's defiance.

She speaks not, but looks back her rival's hate
In silence only broken by the sighs
Of dying Paris, drifting to his fate,
Life's last appeal yet lingering in his eyes.

And then *Œnone* says—"Lo, here is thine,
All thine to love and heal : he waits thy care ;
But be thou quick : upon a slender line
Life frets itself : thou hast no time to spare."

Then Helen looks at Paris, and her pride
Bends to her love. "Maiden," she says, "forgive
The wrong that's done, and let thy pity hide
Thine anger—he is thine to die or live.

“Spare him, for thou canst heal, and thou alone,
And on my head the blame and burden lie—
Yea, let my life for both of us atone.
Spare him, for he is thine to live or die.”

And in CEnone's eyes the angry look
Softens, she sighs, tears tremble on her cheek.
She turns and stoops, and reaches to the brook :
Once more for healing herbs her hand would seek.

But as she stoops, lo ! suddenly she turns,
And sees the triumph on her rival's face :
Sees, too, the longing look that Paris burns,
Even in the moment of her pitying grace.

And in that moment all her warmth is cooled :
Far in the stream the gathered herbs she flings,
And crying—“ Never more will I be fooled ! ”
Into the darkness of the woodland springs.

Then Paris sighs like one whose hope is lost,
And Helen in the silence counts his breath.
With bars of black the crimson sun is crossed,
The crimson sun that sinks with him to death.

The distant sea is reddened with its light,
While Helen watches Paris in his sleep.
She sighs, and then she shivers at the night :
Fitter her soul to wanton than to weep.

She sighs, and says—"O love, we had our day,
The brightest day of all the blossoming years.
'Twas like the first sweet breath of scented May ;
And now 'tis gone beyond the waste of tears."

So Helen looks once more, gives one more kiss,
Then down the valley passes on slow feet ;
And soon another day will bring fresh bliss,
For still the world has something that is sweet.

Then from the wood a shadow creeps, and kneels
By Paris, with wild eyes and wringing hands—
One that makes moan, and cries on death, and feels
If he still breathes, if life has spent its sands.

The darkness falls and fades, stars wax and wane,
Once more the sunlight brightens stream and wood ;
Yet still she watches, sleepless in her pain,
Tearless, with grief too deep except to brood.

At last she weeps, and cries—"O heavy woe !
The world hath nothing left now thou art gone,
Dear in thy faults ! And my hand let thee go !
And now, O lost to love, I am alone !

"Now is the world no more than nothingness :
Now dost thou wander in the sunless gloom ;
And now I seek thee in that wilderness
Where the world's woeful weeds have ever room !"

216 SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS

She runs, and from the darkness of the glade

Plucks some dank weeds, and makes a deadly drink ;

And soon the chilly hand of death is laid

On her fair life—she trembles on the brink.

She sinks beside her lover, and she cries—

“ O love, I come to thee ! Be quenched the flame

That burned our hearts ! Remembered be love's ties,

Forgotten all my anger and thy blame !

“ Thou couldst not help thy nature, nor I mine :

As the gods shoot the arrow hath to fly ;

And thou wert born to wander, I to pine.

Alas ! that I have suffered thee to die !

“ And now, O love, I also seek the night.

Dearer to me the darkness than the sun.

Better with thee to share death's heavy flight,

Than through bright skies companionless to run.

“O wave-washed Cebren, pity thou my pain !

My soul is weary of the changeful earth.

Let me find peace in thy cool stream again !

Sing me once more the songs that soothed my birth !”

Then all the rippling stream with music breaks,

And voices from the gold-eyed lilies sing,

Fretting the water into whitening flakes,

With fairy laughter bubbling like a spring.

Then from the river's bank a strong white arm

Reaches, and draws her downward to the stream ;

And soon, her sadness yielding to the charm,

Forgotten Earth fades from her like a dream.



THE END



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